

MILITARISM, SECURITY, AND WAR: THE POLITICS OF CONTEMPORARY
HOLLYWOOD SUPERHEROES

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Abstract

In the fields of political science and international relations, engagement with popular culture has been deemed predominantly un-important and irrelevant as an area of study. This dissertation interrogates one of the most popular cultural icons of the early 21st century, the fictional Hollywood superhero, and asks what it does for us to take seriously that which is often deemed frivolous entertainment. Understanding the superhero as a political entity in and of itself, this project reveals the mutually constitutive relationship between its production, consumption and reproduction and particular ideologies around militarism, security and war. Acknowledging the complexities of superhero characters, narratives, and aesthetics such as subversive and contested elements, this project reveals superheroes as potential sites of political and ideological reflection, articulation, constitution, and transgression. This project demonstrates that a pop cultural/aesthetic approach to IR can enable critical practices that contribute to complicating and enhancing our understandings of war and politics.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
 Chapter One: Introduction	 1
Popular Culture is Politics	4
Contemporary Heroes	10
Hollywood Superheroes: Why Film?	14
A Mixed up Method with a Multitude of Influences	20
Re-circulating Representations	29
Let the Adventure Begin! Organization of Chapters	32
 Chapter Two: Negotiating the Superhero as Political Artifact and Enabling Critical Thinking/Practices through Popular Culture	 39
What is a Hero?	43
Subversion?	52
Give Them What They Want!	60
 Chapter Three: The Security Illogic and the Superhero: Interrogating the Connections between Hero Worship and the Normalization of Insecurity	 65
The Exceptionalism of Hyper-moral Superheroes	70
Superhero Security Narratives	88
Imagining Beyond the Metanarrative of (In) Security	100
 Chapter Four: The Militarization of our Contemporary Heroes	 105
Enjoying and Ignoring War	106
Superheroes at War	111
A History of Hollywood Militarism	117
The Re-incarnated Superhero Goes to the Movies	120
Perpetuating a Culture of Militarism	134
 Chapter Five: Masculinities, Militarism, and the Superhero Body	 143
A Typology of Superhero Masculinities: from the Super “Ordinary” to the Post-Human	 145
The Malleable Superhero Body as a Site of Conflict	155
The Neoprene Armored Cape	162
The Body (Filmed) in Action	169
The Complex, Malleable, Subversive Superhero Body ... with Boobs?	174

Chapter Six: “Super”men and the Military Machine: The New Militarized	
Techno-Soldier	189
The Technology/Security Conundrum	194
Military Technology Propaganda?	196
Superheroes are Recruited ... Again	198
Super-heroic Cyborg Soldiers	207
Lessons from Our Heroes	214
 Chapter Seven: Conclusion – Spoiler Alert: Every Good Superhero	
Movie has a Sequel	220
The Affective Register and Unpacking Our ‘Experience’ of Superheroes	221
“I am Batman!” The Full-Immersion Superhero	223
Towards an Aesthetic Politics	225
Change, Self-reflexivity, Critique	227
 Bibliography	234
 Filmography	248

Chapter One: Introduction

What if popular culture can change the way we do (and don't do) politics? What if in looking for different ways to interpret the political, we are better able to understand the problems surrounding us? I have always loved a good action packed superhero movie: exciting explosions, intricate fighting sequences, death defying stunts, threats to mankind that get resolved by heroic characters who endure perilous journeys to save the world – and get the girl. There was little I enjoyed more as a kid than watching Batman and Superman movies and then re-enacting the fighting sequences with my brother and his He-Man and G.I. Joe action figures; it did not register with me, as a child spellbound by the battles of The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles fighting against evil in the sewers of New York, that there were messages I was receiving through my pleasure, and that there was an important politics behind their production. The continuing cascade of Superhero films on screen indicate that my childhood fascination turned adult preoccupation is far from unique. The superhero is a societal obsession more than ever before – and Hollywood has perfected its formula to gain from our desires. Superhero films have been topping box office sales worldwide (in spite of decreasing cinema sales for almost every other genre) and exponentially increased in market share since 2000. This success has contributed to superhero saturation of our everyday lives through advertisements, toys, clothing, bedsheets, coffee mugs, toothbrushes, and boxes of cereal. These films are being seen by the largest and most diverse audiences in history – the phenomenon is indeed global. Entrenched in popular discourse and imagery, it is without a doubt that today “superheroes are everywhere” (Knowles 2007, 3). What might it do for us to take

popular culture seriously, and specifically, to take seriously a culture obsessed with superheroes?

Superheroes are always political. From the way in which they are produced to the way in which they are sold, consumed, and utilized. Whether in print or on television or film, superheroes have been embroiled in wars, they have acted in response to the dangers of organized crime, they have contributed to the popularity of world leaders and they have been used to criticize and take down political agendas. Superheroes have been made to respond to “threats” such as the “war on terror” and positioned as allies for good and protectorates so as to provide solace and reassurance as a government called the country to arms to “fight evil”. They have been made to both support and vilify police, and have been positioned on all sides of contentious political issues, contributing to both ideological awakenings and political unrest. Superheroes have resolved the Cuban missile crisis and attempted to drop a baseball stadium on President Nixon (*X-Men: First Class* (2011); *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014)). When superheroes appeared in comic books, it was not long after that they began to be blamed for social disorder and juvenile delinquency – such was the power they were believed to have. Many respected individuals including President Barack Obama, Edward Said, Gloria Steinem and others have admitted to having been inspired by characters such as Spider-man and Wonder Woman. Indeed, it is no accident that, as comic-book writer Mark Miller explains, “Superhero stories are at their most popular and evocative when they respond to particularly turbulent political times, especially those marred by war and social unrest” (DiPaolo 2011, 1). It is their political embodiment, their nearly universal presence in our everyday, our persevering enjoyment of and perhaps most importantly, their dismissal as

harmless entertainment that makes it undeniably important to understand the political work superheroes do for us. Jason Dittmer clearly illustrates the enormity of this power and its coinciding tendency to be belittled as un-important or trivialized as objects of study:

The combination of power and silliness...is central to the politics of superheroes – they are both bluntly obvious and seemingly innocuous. Superheroes suffuse our everyday existence via TV cartoons, big-budget cinema, and everyday objects such as T-shirts and Pez dispensers, occupying narratives in which Manichean categories of good and evil are embodied by heroes and villains, usually marked as such by their name and costume for all to see. (Dittmer 2013, 2)

The ethical codes, socio-political beliefs, and the actions of superheroes *can*, as DiPaolo demonstrates, simultaneously represent “a healthy, moral, and ethical worldview” or “become the vehicle through which dangerous, divisive political propaganda is being spread through the mass media” (2011, p.3). This latent malleability is precisely where the political potential sits: a nearly universally recognized popular figure with extraordinary power to deliver messages and construct meaning, and thus a potentially influential repository for those who seek to communicate ideology.

In spite of (or perhaps as a result of) a troubled history of comic books and film¹ within American pop culture more generally, superheroes have proven to be valuable topics of study in the fields of theology (See LoCicero 2008; Oropeza 2008; Knowles 2007), philosophy (See White and Arp 2008; Housel and Wisnewski 2009; White 2010), psychology (Fingerroth 2004; Rosenberg 2008) and comic, film and literary studies (See Morrison 2012; Heer and Worcester 2004; Detora 2009; Zimmerman 2004; Coogan

¹ As just one example of this view, Rush Limbaugh, Harold Bloom, and Jeffrey Hart denounced the study or use of comic books and film in higher education deeming its scholarship as “frivolous and proof of the watering-down of education by radically leftist professors and administrators” or what Limbaugh calls “filling young skulls with mush” (DiPaolo 2011, 6).

2006; Wright 2001). The variety of pre-existing academic literature from such literary and cultural critics has, for the most part, tended to focus on the history and origins of the superhero genre, subgenres and characters, fandom culture, censorship, and the style and symbolism exhibited by particular artists. Cultural critics have brilliantly deconstructed the semiotics of individual frames and the symbolism of colour schemes, and they have drawn insightful analyses regarding the historical lineages of individual characters (DiPaolo 2011, 4). Such work has contributed to elevating the respectability of comics in literary status, (consider for example the influential works of *Watchmen* (1986-1987), *Persepolis* (2003) and *Maus* (1973-1991) and the plethora of critical analyses they inspired). The field of politics and International Relations (IR) has, however, for the most part failed to recognize superheroes and popular culture more generally as a legitimate area for study and as an important element of the political.

Popular Culture is Politics

Popular culture *is* politics. Politics, in turn, cannot separate itself from art, culture, the aesthetic. Nonetheless, Pierre Bourdieu's claim that "when one is speaking of 'popular culture,' one is speaking about politics" (Bourdieu 1978, 118) is still considered radical by many both within and outside of academia. The assumption that popular culture is "entertainment for entertainment's sake" continues to persist, as has the troubled history of criticism towards the arts, whereby intellectuals considered the "cultural" activities of the "popular" classes as hindering enlightenment and corrupting intellectual progress: "It has been true of radio, true of movies, and it has certainly been true of television, which has long fought against the perception that its only role was to entertain rather than enlighten" (Nielsen, Smith and Tosca 2008, 132). Despite this

uneasy history of hostility and criticism (which predates the relatively newer forms of popular culture including videogames, the internet, and social media), this project aims to demonstrate that popular culture “has never been an innocent domain of simple entertainments divorced from the concerns of so-called high politics” (Davies and Philpott 2013, 51).

Evidence that the discourses and events of politics, war, and security are shaped by and through popular culture texts and visual representations is plentiful: Consider, for example, the exceptionally managed performance of what has been dubbed the “Top Gun” spectacle of the President George W. Bush presidency: the televised announcement that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended” by Bush in May 2003 was a meticulously crafted show comprised of costume changes, the unfurling of a banner pronouncing “Mission Accomplished”(cheekily prompting audiences to associate the “success” with the inevitable triumph at the end of the action movie of the same name starring the same famous actor as *Top Gun* (1986)), and the choreographed hyper-masculine strut of the President after flying and landing the S-3B Viking jet on the USS Abraham Lincoln. The dramatic pre-planned, well-financed stagecraft was undoubtedly intended to elicit fond memories of the heroic, sexy, and patriotic scene from the beloved 1986 film while simultaneously justifying and glossing over the less-sexy realities of the controversial war. (Kellner 2003, 58; Dodds 2008, 479). This is but one of many incidents wherein a world leader utilized a popular film in order to gain or retain popularity. Newspaper cartoons have received significant attention for their political messages and what can inspire violent reactions. On January 7 2015 a shooting attack at the offices of French satirical weekly magazine, Charlie Hebdo, left 12 people dead and

incited worldwide rallies and debates over freedom of religion and freedom of expression, including inspiring the *Je suis Charlie* movement in support of freedom of speech and against armed violence. The attack, led by Islamic extremists, was purportedly in response to publications of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad.

December 2014 and January 2015 saw pertinent examples of the political and social import of Hollywood film globally with the release of two films: *The Interview* (2014) and academy award nominee (nominated for six awards including best picture) *American Sniper* (2014). The satirical film *The Interview* starring Hollywood leading men Seth Rogan and James Franco, centered on an assassination plot of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Set to be released Christmas Day, following a cyber-attack on Sony Pictures' network server and deteriorating relations between the US and North Korea the films' release was (temporarily) halted and the situation mushroomed into a serious international incident involving terrorist threats against American movie-goers (Saunders 2014). The significant connection and very real political effects of popular culture generally and Hollywood specifically was apparent again merely one month later with the release of another blockbuster film. Directed by Clint Eastwood and starring Bradley Cooper, *American Sniper* (based on the autobiography of the same name) tells the story of Chris Kyle, the famed Navy Seal who is considered one of the most effective snipers in US military history with the "highest known single kill count" of 160 kills (Woolf 2015). Following its draw of record breaking audiences for the second weekend in a row, racist tweets on social media were profuse: "Great fucking movie and now I really want to kill some fucking ragheads," "Nice to see a movie where the Arabs are portrayed for who they really are - vermin scum intent on destroying us." The violent hate was not

relegated to online communities: the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) stated that “the rate of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim threats resulting from the Oscar-nominated war film has already tripled” and asked for the aid of Cooper and Eastwood in combating the rhetoric of hate (ibid.). The national legal and policy director for the ADC, Abed Ayoub, reported that complaints to the organization sharply increased following the release of the film: “The last time we saw such a sharp increase was in 2010, around the Ground Zero mosque” (Ibid.). Veteran Eric Margolis, a long-time experienced reporter in the Middle East called Sniper “loathsome ... [and] A fascist fiesta for low IQ Americans,” (Kelly 2015) while Eastwood defended his film as not “pro-war”.

First Lady Michelle Obama aptly reminded the public that such films can operate as a lens into military life while simultaneously hinting at the contradictions of militarism: “... for all those folks in America who don’t have these kinds of opportunities [to meet veterans and military families personally] films and TV are often the best way to share those stories”, and claimed that the movie stressed “The complicated moral decisions they [troops] are tasked with ... the balancing of love of family with love of country” (Celente 2015). In these two examples alone the entanglement of popular culture with class, race, colonialism, violence, the military, war, political leaders, and activists suggests that the variety of approaches, knowledges and insights that emerge out of popular culture considerations might be what is required to better understand the complexities of such political phenomenon.

While in the broader fields of Politics and IR considerations of the everyday and popular cultural phenomenon remain on the periphery and are often dismissed as irrelevant, there has been an increasing awareness of the entanglement of popular culture

and politics among a small but growing facet of IR scholars who recognize that “cultural production is an important part of how international relations is conceived (as well as how it “gets done”)” (Saunders 2014). Rather than existing as separate domains, one of the premises of this project is that “popular culture *makes* world politics what it is” (Grayson 2015): “It is increasingly clear that it is popular culture that is held in common between the most humble acts of creativity at a mass protest and the inner sanctum of the Oval Office where presidents and their staffers watch and discuss 24 or the Battle of Algiers” (Grayson et al. 2009, 160). A number of key scholars in the past two decades have made key inroads in this direction: academics such as Michael Shapiro (1997, 2009), Richard Gregg (1998, 1999), Cynthia Weber (2001, 2006), Mark Lacy (2003) and Iver Neuman (2006) have been instrumental in opening up for discussion the implication of the visual (the ‘visual turn’) and in particular film for the interpretation, conceptualization and representation of world politics, and pushing for a need to understand the visual as a form of language implicated in politics. Film, as Weber argued, posed a way in which scholars could critically engage with representations of the world that may help unpack their politics: “Accessing visual culture, through popular films, allows us to consider the connections between IR theory and our everyday lives. Using popular films in this way helps us get a sense of everyday connections between the ‘popular’ and the ‘political’” (2001, 9). Further provoking this move towards visual analysis were critical geopolitical scholars such as Ó Tuathail (1996), Joanne Sharp (1998, 2000), and Klaus Dodds (2009) who drew our attention to a ‘popular geopolitics’ in which the way we conceptualize space and place in the everyday affects and is affected by socio-cultural representations. Salter (2011) and Robinson (2014) pressed us to

consider the important insights into the American experience and military obsession that can be gained by acknowledging videogames as an important site for critical research. Academic critics such as Lisle (2003), Campbell (1998), and Weber (2006) further pushed IR scholarship by considering the entanglement of security discourse and practices within popular culture industries while Der Derian illuminated specifically the relationship of our entertainment media with the military (“military-industrial-media-entertainment network” or MIME-NET) and exposed such interdisciplinary research as crucial to understanding war (2001). Critical feminist security studies scholarship by Whitworth (1997; 2004), Weber (1999), Jeffords (1994), Carruthers (2000), Enloe (1989, 2000), Griffin (2015) as well as research by scholars in disciplines such as media and cultural studies have further generated valuable insights around war, media, militarization, masculinity and cultural production. More recently critical feminist scholars such as Puar (2007) have highlighted the problematic gender, queer, and race identity dimensions of popular security entanglements and incorporated biopolitical analyses of violence and the body that have incorporated study of the visual.² This project aims to contribute to the invaluable work of critical scholarship that has challenged IR’s restrictive epistemologies and ontological claims and demonstrate how knowledge of popular culture can be a powerful political and social practice.

In the last decade, scholars within various sub-disciplines of geopolitics, gender studies, and culture and communication studies have begun recognizing popular culture as political in and of itself: as co-constitutive of political and social life, and as a

² This project is further indebted to numerous cultural critics who theorized power and politics as indivisible from culture, including Adorno and Horkheimer (1997 [1944]), Althusser (2001), Appadurai (1996), Barthes (1993 [1957]), Dorfman and Mattelart (1975), Eagleton (2005), Hall (1980), Harvey (1989), Laclau (1979), Lyotard (1984), Said (1981) and Williams (1985).

discourse through which the world gets both understood and constructed. Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies, and Simon Philpott's (2009) formative essay, "Pop Goes IR? Researching the Popular Culture-World Politics Continuum," proposed an understanding of pop-culture that is integrally embedded within political matters such as war, violence and the military and as such can influence, shape, reflect, and inform our relationship with political issues (See Weber 2006; Grayson, K. et al. 2009; Weldes 2003). If narratives and representations of popular culture are a "crucial element in the construction of modern regimes of knowledge and perception, behavior and identity" (Martin 2006, 110), and thus deeply entangled in the production of cultural meaning, then taking seriously the popular narratives and images of today's popular superheroes and their transformations as articulated trans-historically and embedded culturally, politically, and economically, are important for the study of politics. This dissertation asks what it does for us to consider superheroes as political entities and what sorts of practices of world politics they can reveal that often go unnoticed, ignored, or deliberately concealed. In doing so this project theorizes popular culture as a political act and an academic tool that might contribute to furthering and/or undoing our contemporary attempts at understanding global politics.

Contemporary Heroes

The superhero industry is very big business indeed, in many ways bigger than ever. (Knowles 2007, 3)

Superheroes have been and continue to be, in particular, an important part of the cultural landscape in North America. Superheroes have now become a "highly charged laboratory for pop culture" explains Knowles (2007), and the development of superhero "franchises" indicate that their mythology prevails not just in film, television and video games but also in the mundane and seemingly banal elements of our everyday (215).

Today one could, as Zimmerman (2004) exclaims, “wear Spider-Man underwear while riding a Batman rollercoaster, then go home to sit in front of the TV in his Superman (or Wonder Woman) robe watching an X-Men DVD, munching on Incredible Hulk cereal” (10). We are called upon to “Power up!” in the morning with a sugary breakfast cereal endorsed by Iron Man, the Hulk and Captain America to get strong so we can battle against “evil”. These everyday consumer items have functioned as vehicles that have greatly increased the mainstream visibility and profitability of superheroes, making them potent and important entertainment giants and commodities (Ibid. 15). Some scholars have gone so far as to label superheroes as promotional texts, a “brand-hero hybrid”, no longer afforded the luxury of complex narrative but literally a super-brand, “birthed within a corporation”, and manufactured for the primary purpose of marketing (Stokes 2007, 321-333).

The immense popularity of superheroes evident in the production and consumption of these popular icons in everyday elements of contemporary society is central: as they reflect and construct elements of the world around us they thus have the ability to impart particular ideologies and values, and not just to the children who idolize them. Superheroes, exclaims Knowles (2007) “are nothing less than Gods” (10). This association is no accident: Jerry Siegel recounts the creation of his first version of Superman as a deliberate attempt to reference “universally known and respected – if not necessarily admired – heroes of religion and mythology” such as Samson and Hercules. Indeed, mythological and biblical heroes such as Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Moses, and Thor are undoubtedly precursors to today’s superheroes (Fingeroth 2004, 13-16).

Scholars, literary figures, and fans alike have probed our fascination with superheroes, revealing that upon inspection, they have much to tell us about our own understandings of power, ethics and responsibility, religion, sovereignty, masculinity, race, and desire; Zimmerman (2004), for example exposes their cultural significance as models of virtue and moral character, a reflection of who we are and what we value. Others have linked superhero narratives to historical events, religious origins or philosophical puzzles, claiming that their dominance as our cultural icons means they can play an important role in helping us unravel big ontological and epistemological questions (See Kaveney 2008; Morris and Morris 2005). In contemporary society, superheroes seem to have replaced ancient and biblical mythologies as modern day deities, necessitating our serious engagement with them. As Christopher Knowles (2007) declares: "...it was the heroes of the comics and not the bible where I learned morality and fair play and compassion and decency" (xiv) through their embedded messages and morals:

The superhero has a unique signifying function. It can be used to express ideas that other genres cannot portray well. Superheroes embody a vision of the use of power unique to America. Superheroes enforce their own visions of right and wrong on others, and they possess overwhelming power, especially in relation to ordinary crooks. They can project power without danger to themselves, and they can effortlessly solve problems that the ordinary authorities cannot handle. (Coogan 2006, 231)

Similarly, Rosenberg recognizes:

...Superhero stories are about morality and loyalty, about self-doubt and conviction of beliefs...the sagas of superheroes bring us out of ourselves and connect us with something larger than ourselves, something more universal. Moreover, in our superheroes' foibles, struggles, and triumphs, we can see elements of our own foibles and struggles, and hope for our triumphs. (Rosenberg 2008, 2)

Interestingly, this unique signifying function is so influential that, as Rubin (2006) reveals, they are used in clinical work with children and they can be utilized as a therapeutic resource in counseling and play therapy. Consider, for example Rosenberg's realization of the way in which superhero narratives are reflective of psychoanalytic theories:

As a psychologist, I spotted the ways in which their stories reflect psychological theories and research findings. For instance, in the wake of witnessing his parents' brutal murder, Bruce Wayne decides to dedicate his life to protecting innocent lives. Thus Batman was born. Psychological research suggests that the underlying process of the birth of Batman isn't farfetched and is, in fact, common: After people have experienced a traumatic event, they often struggle to make meaning of the experience, and one such path is through social action. (Rosenberg 2008, 2)

Indeed, psychologists have uncovered that the use of superheroes in practice can produce distinct and predictable emotional valences and that the observational learning through which we can "try on" a particular morality by engaging with the different models of moral behavior is valuable:

They try to figure out the "right" path to take in a given situation: When – if ever – is it okay to lie in the service of a greater good? When should violence or the threat of violence be used as punishment? When should it be used as a deterrent? How much force is "too much?" How can a small band of people fight against the never-ending parade of criminals? And how can people maintain hope in the face of such adversity? (Rosenberg 2008, 2)³

That superheroes and superhero narratives are imbued with indications towards moral virtue requires an inquisition of the particular constructed ideas of morality and heroism that dominate the genre. For, as DiPaolo explains: just as Tolstoy believed that "the best way to change society was to transmit morally informed art to the masses", in

³ Similar questions are at the core of ethics in IR: Just War Theory is a doctrine premised on the moral justifications of war and the moral conduct in war; The Responsibility to Protect is an international security and human rights norm for military intervention that invokes questions such as what methods of intervention are morally acceptable, what costs are acceptable, who or what is worth saving/(Or in Judith Butler's words, grievable), and how do we determine who if anyone has the right or ability to decide when and how to intervene?

contemporary western society, “if any popular art has the potential to change public opinion for the better, especially now, it is the superhero story at the height of its popularity” (DiPaolo 2011, 6). The reach of their inspiration, enjoyment and influence makes superheroes particularly important to study considering their assumed innocuousness and widespread acceptance.

Hollywood Superheroes: Why Film?

Movies really do shape, reflect and reinforce our opinions, even though we often dismiss them as silly – ‘It’s only a movie’. (Christensen and Haas 2005, 13)

The majority of superhero characters originated in comic books, however, today the number and popularity of film adaptations of those characters is momentous: between 1978 and 2015, over 100 full length superhero movies were released in theatres, and Marvel alone has announced the release of 32 comic book based superhero movies by 2020. Superheroes are an exceedingly profitable mega-industry which are developed to create successful franchises that employ comic books, toys, and film. Movie remakes of comic book superheroes have now dominated box office records for decades and continue to do so: the 2008 film adaptation of the comic book *Iron Man* grossed (USD) \$585 million worldwide and its 2010 sequel earned the top spot on opening weekend; *Batman The Dark Knight* (2008) earned a US total gross of \$533,316,061, and *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra*, the 2009 Hollywood film adaptation of the G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero toy franchise reached a domestic total gross of (USD) \$150,201,498 and a worldwide gross of (USD) \$302,469,017 (Box Office Mojo). Both of the comic book remakes of *The Avengers* (2012) and *Avengers: The Age of Ultron* (2015) grossed worldwide totals of over 1.4 billion US dollars. As Fingeroth explains, “the continued cross-pollination between incarnations of superheroes from one medium to another has

been part of the entertainment megaculture since there was more than one mass medium that a character could appear in” (Fingeroth 2004, 27). While an analysis of the increase in publications and productions of various mediums that engage with superhero content and engagement with shifts historically of characters, storylines, and aesthetic would no doubt offer significant depth for a case study on superheroes, a project concerned with contemporary politics is better served by the medium that today reaches the biggest and broadest audience. For, if one were to ask a child today “When was the last time you bought a Spider-Man comic” Fingeroth muses, the answer would likely be “What’s a comic?”(2004, 27). Indeed, comic books, while the inspiration for and origins of many contemporary superheroes, are undoubtedly worthy of study, the medium of film allows for the analysis of a much larger audience amongst whom the genre now proliferates.⁴

Movies have since their creation, been intimately tied to their social and geopolitical surroundings: “Film creators tap into the events, fears, fantasies, and hopes of an era and give cinematic expression to social experiences and realities” explains Dixon (2004, 4), meaning that movies can “act as maps for the everyday social-cultural and geopolitical imaginaries and realities of everyday life” (Lukinbeal 2004, 247). It is not only ‘war films’ that have political implications (Dixon 2004; Suid 2002, O’Connor and Rollins 28), but every film draws from and can impact its environment. In societies such as the United States where mainstream news organizations play such an enormous role in (mis)informing the public on world politics, film becomes an ever more important

⁴ With the growth of web television miniseries by digital streaming service providers such as Netflix and HBO, the line between television shows and movies has been blurred and audiences have even greater access to movie-like formats superhero narratives. In addition, cable television has recognized the popularity of comic inspired and superhero driven series and have ramped up production since 2000. A few such examples of this exhaustive list includes: *Smallville* (2001-2011), *Heroes* (2006-2010) *The Flash* (2014), *Supergirl* (2015), *Jessica Jones* (2015), *Daredevil* (2015), *Luke Cage* (2016), *Iron Fist* (2017), *The Defenders* (2017), *The Gifted* (2017), *The Inhumans* (2017).

medium for civic engagement; film narratives can be a creative outlet for alternative views and the film industry can potentially be an environment more hospitable to ideas outside of the mainstream (this idea of the film industry as a site of revolution allowing for the circulation of unpopular ideas, dissent, or critical thought is of course increasingly at risk with the consolidation of the industry). Drawing attention to the culture of media post 9/11 Henry Giroux argued “as the opportunities for civic education and public engagement begin to disappear, film may provide one of the few mediums left that enables conversations that connects politics, personal experiences, and public life to larger social issues” (2002, 7). As Dodds reminds us however, “film can dramatize particular events and make visible some events at the expense of others” (2008, 486) as cinema is “after all the supreme maker and manipulator of images for commercial purposes. And the very act of using it well entails reducing the complex stories of daily life to a sequence of images on a depthless screen” (Lacy 2001, 643). Thus, film is one of contemporary society’s most powerful mediums of communication, and its potential for influencing both opinions and practices, is one of the starting points for this analysis.

The mass production and distribution of Hollywood “blockbusters” itself makes such films an important artefact for critical analysis. The term, ironically, originated to describe an aerial bomb that could take out an entire city block and is used today to identify movies that primarily attain mass market financial success by earning substantially more than the production budget, thus generating a substantial profit. The term is not necessarily associated with audience response (“Blockbuster” 2014). Superhero blockbusters are today part of an empire of products that maintain and expand the reach of superhero ideology; today for example new media and technology such as 3-

D film, computer graphics (CG), video gaming, and social media have increased possibilities for audience participation and have provided opportunities for bringing a whole host of new heroes to life while portraying familiar heroes of the past in even more awe-inspiring and/or realistic ways while simultaneously reaching an even larger audience globally. The result is that the superhero has reached a level of popularity never seen before and has become a ubiquitous figure in popular culture. This is, for the most part, attributable to the multi-million dollar blockbuster film industry and the increased monopolization and franchising of superhero comics into “Universal” industries, or what Jenkins calls “horizontal integration”: that is, “the consolidation of holdings across multiple industries” that produces “strategies of content development and distribution designed to increase the “synergy” between the different divisions of the same company” (Jenkins 2001, 552). This synergy increases the commercial stakes of productions which seeks to magnify and prolong the engagement of audiences while simultaneously seeking the formation of strategic alliances with “a multitude of corporate partners, including fast-food franchises and soft drink bottlers” in order to “exploit and enlarge public interest” (Jenkins 2001, 554).⁵ It is therefore unsurprising that superhero films have had unprecedented box office success, far outselling other films released at the same time, both in the US and globally. Individual characters, storylines, and entire superhero “universes” have attained a cult status (Ndalianis 2007, 1), namely Batman and Superman in the DC Universe and X-Men, Wolverine, Captain America, Iron Man, and The Avengers in the Marvel Universe.

⁵ Jenkins here is referencing specifically the politics around the licensing and marketing of the *Star Wars* franchise, however he makes the argument in reference to the industry as a whole.

This project thus deliberately focuses on the Hollywood superhero subgenre for several reasons: the superhero film in particular often escapes critical analysis, dismissed as a vehicle for profit, ignored as fantasy, or overlooked as ‘pure children’s entertainment’. However, films, argues Kellner (2010), are particularly revealing indicators of reality, largely because so much research and investment is dedicated to ensuring the products’ success. Moreover, the shift from comic books to film as the most popular site for superhero engagement has in and of itself offered many advantages: while comic books gave readers the ability to create their own time-frame, controlling the flow of events as they wished (Knowles, 214), the modern cinema enables a “super-real” spectacle, proffering a realism to the most outlandish of filmmakers fantasy’s that was never possible before; we are, however, simultaneously comforted by the very act of entering the movie theatre, Dixon (2004) explains, knowing that what we are about to experience is entirely a construct (8). This assurance may play a part in justifying the gratuitous amounts of violence that audiences accept in typical Hollywood action films. Blockbuster superhero movies in particular engender themselves to this comfortable violence as our “larger than life” heroes and their superhuman powers at once become both real and hyper-real embodiments of “spectacle, sex, and violence” fundamentally as a result of the industry’s profit driving motive:

The cinema as we know it in the 1960’s, or even as late as the 1980’s, has utterly vanished, to be replaced with an assembly line of factory-tooled genre vehicles that deliver predictable thrills to increasingly unsophisticated audiences. The past of cinema, except for a few carefully chosen canonical classics, has vanished; what matters to Hollywood is what will sell now... Nothing can be left to chance, if only because the financial stakes are so high. (Dixon 2004, 15)

Superhero films are now one of the most predictable blockbuster formulas, which ensures the profitability of these films and helps assert monopoly control over the industry (Baker

2009, 270) and in turn, regarding superhero mythology, Hollywood is now “the most powerful institution involved in its production, distribution and consumption” (Strinati 2000, 152).

Across a diverse global audience Hollywood superhero movies have succeeded in having mass appeal. Of course, at the level of the individual there are multiple and contradictory reasons why the movies appeal in different ways to different people, for example the use of iconic and recognizable figures, popular actors with “star power,” relatable heroic mythology, and even the simple desire to, for a moment, forget about the everyday demands of life and “escape” into another world. Indeed, the immense popularity of the superhero at any point in time and in particular geopolitical spaces can reveal a lot about what audiences find pleasurable – that “the specific popular fantasies articulated by these ubiquitous cultural commodities can therefore teach us a great deal about what global audiences have been taught to find pleasurable and – perhaps – why” (Hassler-Forest, 13). This, of course, necessitates inquiring about the political economy of the superhero industry; for instance, adherence to genre conventions is typically one strategy that contributes to market success, as does the deliberate blurring of several successful blockbuster genres. It is such a coalescence that is useful in attempting to define the particular artifacts that are the primary subject of this study.

While much effort has been devoted within film studies to categorize and compartmentalize movies into specific genres, the fairly recent historical emergence of blockbuster Hollywood superhero movies is relatively recent and, I would argue, methodologically useful. As a sub-genre, the Hollywood superhero film is comprised of a historical lineage of multiple genres that includes elements of the following: the comics

they may have originated in, the action cinema genre, western and adventure films, science fiction and disaster films, war films and propaganda cartoons, and even satirical action comedies. Ultimately, one might construe this contemporary sub-genre of Hollywood superhero/action Blockbusters as, according to one critic “masses of truly awful baddies doing battle with a small number of ridiculously heroic goodies in improbably gory settings while everything blows up around them” (McLaren 2015). What this means, however, is that it is increasingly hard to distinguish between these sub-genres; for instance, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009) can easily fit into the category of action adventure, sci-fi, and superhero genres. Similarly G.I. Joe is a children’s action figure, turned into a cartoon, turned into a Hollywood blockbuster action film – however the film adheres to all of the conventions of Hollywood superhero films and thus I believe it can contribute to the analysis herein. Thus, the analyses that follow refers to texts that some might categorize as “action films” or “science fiction films”, or “action adventure films,” however the heroic narrative and “super” power/abilities are present and thus make relevant and significant the various texts used throughout.

A Mixed up Method with a Multitude of Influences

What might we encounter in opening up conventional scholarly practices? One of the underlying theories that informs this dissertation is that in trying to understand war, violence, and our global and local social and political landscape with and through popular culture, adherence to disciplinarity, singular theoretical approaches, and academia in general is insufficient. In 1989, Cynthia Enloe effectively argued that if we made concepts such as “wife” and “mother” central to our investigations in international

politics we would likely discover a very different international politics with which to contend (Enloe 1989, 11). Restricting our approaches to political analyses can, in turn, limit our understanding. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, “prevalent faculties, including reason, were simply incapable of grasping the event in its totality”, Bleiker explains, “policy analyses in particular were unable to capture and deal with the emotional side of the events – a shortcoming that explains the astonishing outpouring of artistic creativity in the months that followed the attack” (2009, 49). What might it do for us to turn our attention to the less visible and understudied practices and artifacts that are entangled in war? By including the everyday politics of popular culture, entwining mixed methodological approaches in our studies, and broadening our disciplinary commitments we might realize very different, multiple, and complex understandings of and engagements with international politics. This thesis undertakes this challenge by considering hero mythology, heroic narratives, cinematographic techniques, the industries of film production and military technology, and the convoluted history of wartime comics to name but a few elements considered potentially significant in unpacking the co-constitutive nature of superheroes and politics.

We rely on various frameworks of interpretation and on constantly shifting modes of representation to construct meaning, as such, understanding that meaning is always dynamic, and our understanding and interpretation of meaning is always shifting and always relative is central. Recognizing the impossibility of a single source or site of meaning-making is vital for any critical analyses in politics and/or popular culture. As Stuart Hall explained, culture

...is...a process, a set of practices. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings—‘the giving and taking of meaning’—

between the members of a society or group... Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is around them, and ‘making sense’ of the world in broadly similar ways... Things ‘in themselves’ rarely if ever have any one, single, fixed and unchanging meaning... It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them – how we represent them – that we *give them a meaning*. In part, we give objects, people and events meaning by the frameworks of interpretation which we bring to them. In part, we give things meaning by how we use them, or integrate them into our everyday practices... In part, we give things meaning by how we *represent* them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them... Meaning is constantly being produced and exchanged in every personal and social interaction in which we take part. In a sense, this is the most privileged, though often most neglected, site of culture and meaning. It is also produced in a variety of different *media*... (Hall 1997, 2-3)

Thus any critical work on popular culture, as Grayson articulates, can only be undertaken with “socio-historical consideration of its producer or audience or context of reception” (Grayson 2015). The approach used in this study does not focus exclusively on the intentions or motives of the producer, writer, and director, nor does it situate itself entirely in the complex field of audience studies, but rather draws on elements of both in congruence with analyses of the aesthetic, affective, political and social elements that are vital to take into account in attempting to understand the complexities of popular culture artifacts. All of these approaches, while offering potential merits to a study on superhero movies, are on their own exceedingly problematic and incomplete for this thesis. First, the question of authorship, particularly with regards to mainstream commercial Hollywood superhero productions is exceedingly complex: Who is the author? The writer? The artist or artists? The producer or the audience whose social media responses and cinema attendances are meticulously examined? And, as Dittmer argues, “how much agency can be exercised by either of these roles in the face of editorial or corporate opposition to a plot or specific image? How does even the tacit *potential* for editorial intervention shape the creative process?” (2013, 4) Moreover, filmmakers rarely reveal

their intentions directly, and as I will discuss, may in fact remain aloof on this matter intentionally. Just as pop culture texts can be read in multiple ways by various audiences, it is not always possible to interpret political messages in the narratives, DiPaolo explains, as writers do not always reveal their political biases and the reader/viewers interpretation cannot be controlled (2011, 14-15) depending on the historical period, societal circumstances, age, gender, and so on. Additionally, characters, narrative direction, and superhero storylines can evolve drastically over time as a result of the multitude of writers and storytellers behind their re-incarnations, often as a result of shifting cultural values during their time of production; awareness of the trans-historical nature of the genre and the permutations that are constantly occurring is important for such a study.

As Dittmer argues, because comics have always attempted to follow cultural trends in order to survive publication runs, the audience “looms increasingly large in the production process and therefore shares in the author-ity of narrative” (2013, 4). This audience however, is in and of itself nearly impossible to define, making accurate representation of audience opinion through audience studies extremely difficult to determine. For example, Dittmer analyses the dominant audience response to Marvel Comics *Civil War* (2006-2007), which is widely seen as a parallel for the debates over the USA PATRIOT Act and Bush administration security policies post 9-11, as identifying with and siding with anti-registration superheroes rather than the defenseless humans. Alternate readings, Dittmer argues, might sympathize with the humans and associate the anti-registration superheroes with the Bush administration who systematically undermines international institutions, legal frameworks, and the liberal international

order entirely in favour of acting unilaterally (Dittmer 2013, 12-13). However, crucial for any analysis of superheroes (and in particular to this analysis) is to understand that the conventions of the genre attempt to assure the positioning of the readers' subjectivities or alliance *with* the superhero: "Superheroes almost always serve as the moral center of their own story line, and the desire bubbling beneath the surface of many readers' engagements with superhero comic books – the desire to leap, fly, hurl, pound – further encourages identification with the superpowered." (13) Thus, while readings of superhero narratives of course vary from individual to individual, it is generally assumed that the superhero is positioned as the protagonist – this aspect is highly pertinent when unpacking the motives, perspectives, and actions of the superhero character and audience/reader.

Audience studies and academic analyses on perception, emotive response, and the embodiment of affect is an important and understudied area in popular culture and politics: "There is a great deal of detailed textual and visual analysis of particular films on offer without any corresponding attention to how people watching those movies [...] make sense of them" (Dodds 2008, 486). This lack is likely the result of both the methodological difficulties in conducting such studies, as considered briefly above, but also of the intellectual legacy of film and popular culture studies which, as Dodds reminds us was influenced primarily by theories of spectatorship and underpinned by the drive to understand, primarily, an inherent *meaning* of a film (486). There is currently a burgeoning interest in various aspects of the audience, including approaching the audience as a market, which is important and is utilized intermittently when relevant in this project, typically to simply emphasize the exorbitant number of people who have

seen a particular film, thus emphasizing the films' popularity. However, as mentioned earlier, while paying attention to what is bought and sold in the entertainment market reveals a lot about our political environment and our role within it, it is not a sufficient determinant of the multiple and varied effects of cultural products nor is it valuable in the absence of critically informed knowledge of the system in which such products circulate.

The way in which films are framed for particular audiences and the various filmmaking techniques that are deployed to capture and hold an audience's attention is another approach that is significant when deliberate strategies to elicit affect are utilized alongside narrative and genre conventions that together can create memorable and impactful experiences. Techniques such as the use of computer graphic imagery (CGI) and other special effects, cinematography, sound, and score are considered recurrently in this project where they entwine with the narrative and character development to contribute to the production particular feelings, ideas and emotions of an audience. This approach is underutilized in most scholarship in popular culture and politics only touched upon here; future work from this approach is arguably where this project might productively move forward.

Finally, ethnographic studies of film audiences have become increasingly popular possibly as a result of the ability to eschew previously laborious methods such as focus groups and interviews and instead utilize the wealth of information on internet forums and easily accessible online reviews. In particular, the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) is a useful tool in that the website not only stores comprehensive information about every film ever released (most inclusive of North American releases but the site does attempt to be globally inclusive) including box office sales, interesting facts, plot summaries,

memorable quotes, but also includes member forums and space for conversation about the film and audience reviews. Although drawing primarily from such audience comments and contributions as a method for an audience study is inevitably problematic (for several reasons, one of which is the self-selective nature and thus skewed results from audiences which tends towards participation on websites and online forums), the data available on IMDb and the variety of audience contributions can be useful for generating a broad overarching understanding of how the film was produced as well as how it was received. As Dodds explains, the huge popularity of such sites allows us the opportunity to begin to chart audience reactions to films through the thousands of contributions, comments and votes: “On accessing the IMDb (<http://www.imdb.com>), one is presented with an opportunity to consider the possible effect of popular films on individuals and interpretive communities...to contemplate how and with what consequences people respond to films” (2008, 487). Consider the 2012 Blockbuster superhero film *The Avengers* which garnered 740, 444 votes (amounting to an average rating of 8.2 out of 10) and reviews written by 1,616 users at the time of writing. The diversity of interpretations and profound differences of opinion on the film reveals the difficulty in studying audience reactions. Reviews ranged from: “Have movies become so bad these days that a merely well-executed totally formulaic film, like "The Avengers," is heralded as an exceptional film?” to “I'm sorry to say The Avengers isn't a good movie; it's a GREAT MOVIE!!!! It's not only the best team superhero movie ever made, but it may just be the best comic book adaption made period!” (Reviews 2014, 1). Moreover, while some audience members may focus their analyses and critiques of films around cinematography fails, or plotline or genre “flaws”, others engage with the ethical,

political and legal issues represented in narratives. While such engagement with audience methodologies can then, as Dodds reveals, provide insight into the ways in which audiences experience particular aspects of a film, they may not be as useful in understanding the various and multidimensional ways individuals make sense of their (potentially mixed) messages (2008, 488-490). This project thus draws upon IMDb throughout to a limited extent but does not rely wholly upon the website as a source, and ultimately recognizes, in line with Dittmer, that meaning is constructed through a collaborative effort of writers, artists, producers, and readers/audiences (2013, 3).

This mixed methodological approach is grounded in discourse analysis, visual interpretation, narrative deconstruction, and analysis of the aesthetic of particular scenes or films as a whole, while periodically turning to production specifics, relation to historical events, and audience response through online commentary. Although the origin and historical transformation of superheroes and their relationship to broader socio-political events is one centered within the comic book industry (which will be drawn on as necessary), as the focus of this analysis is primarily on contemporary IR and security studies issues I have chosen the most popular and accessible medium through which superhero characters and narratives are accessed, film.⁶⁶ Similarly, while the origins of the superhero genre is for the most part associated with the United States (and there are differences among individual characters and narratives produced in different countries), the popular obsession with superheroes is undoubtedly a “resolutely transnational phenomenon whose appeal exceeds national borders” (Dittmer 2013, 5), and “any

⁶⁶ There also exists a plethora of texts wherein the attention is placed primarily on comic books, the comic book industry, and the transformation of characters historically. See for example Kaveney 2008, Coogan 2006, Wright 2001)

attempt to tie superheroes exclusively to the United States is thwarted, if not vanquished, by the historical evidence of transnational cultural flows both at the origins of the genre and now, with the superhero genre successful in many places around the world” (16). As this project is interested primarily with the mass produced and widely consumed superhero films of Hollywood and the international politics of “the West”, it is limited to thus, however, some of the most interesting challenges towards, subversions, and transgressions of Hollywood’s’ representations of superheroes is emerging from the non-Western socio-cultural spaces and involve an array of practices, artifacts and discourses that will comprise an important part of the following analysis. The methodological plurality of such an analyses necessitates the interdisciplinary approach (and vice versa) and invites curiosity, precipitates approaching war and the military from an inquisitive rather than taken for granted point of view, and enables potentially new avenues for inquiry by bringing into conversation diverse approaches that can prod at assumptions and epistemologies.

The sub-field of Popular Culture and World Politics (PCWP) has emerged as an important site for interdisciplinary approaches and methodological plurality led by scholars committed to increasing the fields’ recognition of the inseparability of politics from art, culture and aesthetics. Grayson has cogently explained the importance of a pluralist yet holistic approach:

[T]he relegation of culture within IR has always struck me as a curious but fatal oversight. IR positions itself as a discipline that understands power and its effects on a global scale. Yet its two dimensional instrumentalist view of power cannot account for how power works through normalization, discipline, alienation, mythologisation, affect, control, representation, performativity, production, and/or the processes of constructing political imaginations that are central to world politics. Thus, in my own work, I refuse to artificially impose boundaries between politics and culture, amongst identities and texts, between power and sensation, or

amongst artefacts and the practices of order. And one of the most important sites for the production, circulation, and contestation of relations of power is popular culture. (Grayson 2015)

Thus, this project is informed theoretically by myriad influences including critical and feminist security studies, critical military studies, work on militarized masculinities and violence, biopolitics and post-human theorizing, and media studies, cultural studies and film theory. It is within the growing body of theoretically diverse scholarship in popular culture and politics that promotes an aesthetic approach to politics, recognizes the equally important inclusion of visual analyses, and recognizes the value of transdisciplinarity where it is hoped this project can make a unique intervention and a valuable contribution - because, “if popular culture makes world politics what it is” as Grayson declares, “we need to be prepared to question the assumptions that underpin our understandings of both while seeking to analyze what is at stake when one is rendered in the terms of the other” (Grayson 2015). This project moves in and out and around literatures of militarization, the body, masculinities, post-humanism, nanotechnology, and security in order to enable new avenues for inquiry and poke holes into the knot of popular culture and war with the ultimate goal of unraveling its often invisible ties. This is how we might better be able to reveal and understand the multiple and connected sites and forms of power and violence.

Re-circulating Representations

There is, as a writer, intermediary, and translator of my own interpretations of cultural products, an authorial dilemma in writing popular culture research: as a researcher and writer with the privilege of re-representing and re-circulating my own understandings, to whom do I have ethical responsibilities and how can I recognize and impart my own role within the disciplinary, benevolent (but not benign) structures of meaning making, both within the academe and the broader culture? Additionally, the

sheer volume of relevant cultural products and characters which continues to expand rapidly requires that a project of this nature unfortunately omits some and highlights others in a self-selected process. Thus, the project's empirical focus, is organized topically rather than on any individual superhero character, and has, as mentioned earlier, drawn upon the most popular (based on box office sales) superhero films from the past several decades. The Hollywood superhero subgenre is the focus of this project because it is clearly where most popular conceptions of contemporary superheroes are created and experienced; it is also here that we might better be able to conceive of the political work superheroes do and the politics they are a part of in relation to contemporary politics and IR. Following Dittmer's assertion that while attempts to distinguish an exclusivist notion of the superhero genre may be productive for certain analyses, for this project "rather than obsess about who is a superhero and who is not, I see it perhaps more useful to consider genres as continually in interaction with one another, each a hybrid form, continually in process, with influences from a wide array of antecedents. The naming and delineating of what is, or is not, within a genre is itself an act of power and control" (Dittmer 2013, 7) Richard Reynolds also explains that "the superhero genre is tightly defined and defended by its committed readership – often to the exasperation of writers and artists, many of whom have proclaimed it to be a worn-out formula from as long ago as the 1970's" (Reynolds 1992, 7).

The characters within this group of popular superheroes that I have chosen to highlight are also admittedly somewhat reflective of author bias: relatively recently released movies are easily accessible and having been exposed to variations of some of these characters (and enjoyed them) since childhood, it is easier to deconstruct and situate

within the genre historically than those I am unfamiliar with. That I delight in certain characters and films more than others and that my preference often (but not always) aligns with box office sales also brings into purview questions of pleasure and desire as fundamental to politics and as a potential coercive, disciplinary function at the nexus of popular culture and politics managed for the creation and maintenance of subjects necessary for war-making; thus, the topics chosen also logically reflect my academic interest and expertise in particular areas of IR scholarship and global issues. This study is necessarily self-reflexive: my power and positionality in the research and writing process suggests that such a study is not just reflecting on how politico-socio-cultural imaginations can reflect and impact thoughts and practices around war, but my reflections/representations themselves can contribute to a particular discourse as can others. Many of the arguments that follow can nonetheless be extrapolated to superheroes more generally. The project at times deliberately draws on my own affective responses to scenes in order to convey my particular and individual reaction; these accounts are in no way intended to represent a universal reading of that text but rather are explored as part of an attempt at a more nuanced understanding of the political and personal entanglements of that popular artifact.

Thus, two caveats are in order. Firstly, this thesis in no way intends to singularly attribute national American militarism to Hollywood or to deny that the mainstream film industry is commercially motivated. Nor does it intend to reify cultural products and pretend that the representations of military technology in film are, or are meant to be, realistic, or that they are necessarily intended to be read as anything but fantastical entertainment. Secondly, the interpretations of films included as examples in this thesis

are not meant to represent the definitive reading of these texts; it is essential, in fact, to recognize that pop culture texts can be read in multiple ways by various audiences depending on the historical period, societal circumstances, age, gender, etc. and are often a deliberate ambiguous construction. Thus, this analysis looks specifically at American Hollywood productions in particular due to their national and global popularity and profits, but does not in any way propose that the authors reading is universal.

Let the Adventure Begin! Organization of Chapters

Interrogating the Superhero film as a political artifact in and of itself means that the potential range of topics for such an inquiry is extensive, therefore, I have attempted to narrow the focus of this project by concentrating on the central and nearly universal theme of contemporary Hollywood superhero films. Remaining very much in congruence with the American monomyth, this theme is centered on a hyper masculine, vigilante (typically law-transcending, or as Dittmer labels, “pop-fascist” (2013, 11)) figure(s) who utilizes super-human abilities, superpowers, technology, armour, and/or weapons to “protect”/secure an individual, community, or status quo from an adversary. Thus, the analysis converges around the four main foci of this narrative which manifests congruently as the foremost pervasive entanglements of critical International Relations scholarship: security, militarization, masculinity, and military technology. These themes overlap, intersect, and appear in various forms in the narrative, character development, aesthetic, and production of Hollywood superhero films. Each theme is examined individually in separate chapters in order to best highlight its convergence specifically with superheroes in popular culture and politics. These chapters can thus be read independently and in any order: each engagement stands as an important puzzle piece

(that can be moved around) which, while not building sequentially, together form the overall argument of this thesis. Additionally, across the chapters various approaches are utilized to unpack and better comprehend the politics of superheroes. The reader will find for instance, that some sections emphasize the economics of production while others focus more closely on the power of representation through narrative and character development or images and symbols. In other sections it is my desire that the character's voices and my attempt at conveying an aesthetic speak to the reader directly through individual audience reception, recognizing the importance of production choices and affective objectives as well as the filter that my words constitute for the reader. The feelings experienced by and through popular culture are extremely important – they are in and of themselves political and politically subjective. In other sections I shift to data on the trade of military hardware in exchange for script concessions, to the impact of social media commentaries on future character modifications, to the shifting gender of characters as a result of audience dissatisfaction with the lack and type of representation of female heroes. Chapter 2 for instance, interrogates how the characters and dialogue in *The Avengers* exhibits parallels and paradoxes with security discourse, while Chapter 3 shifts to highlight the political and economic relationship between Hollywood and the US military and the resulting effects this has had on film production and development. It also reveals both the trans-historical consistencies and inconsistencies of war themed comics and movies, a complement to the single film snapshot presented in Chapter 2. Chapter 4 considers the aesthetics of Superhero characters by focusing on the presentation of their bodies, costumes, and physicality, while Chapter 5 relies on data regarding developments in military technology and the symbiotic economies of militarism and popular culture.

These moves between methods and approaches is a deliberate attempt to emphasize how focusing on various elements and utilizing a multiplicity of methods enlarges the dimensions through which we understand the political.

Throughout each of these chapters the recognition of movies as political, social, economic entities that allow for the embodiment and representation of complex and mobile motivations, moralities, and ideologies suggests that they are also then important sites of subversion, contestation and transgression. Chapter 1 thus initiates this thesis by proposing that Superheroes are popular culture artifacts in and of themselves and thus are in their essence a site of struggle and negotiation. In their creation and reception, Superheroes have the ability to enable critical thinking; they can and have been brilliantly parodied, subverted, and critiqued in ways that can turn the narrative upside-down exposing the politics embedded therein. In each of the chapters that follows elements of such possibilities are incorporated. Counter-narratives of nationalist superheroes like Captain America, for example, can potentially expose the problematic ideological underpinnings of generic conventions, such that, as Dittmer illustrates,

The patriotism of Captain America morphs into ethnic hierarchy, the vigilantism of Captain Britain becomes indistinguishable from that of the Ku Klux Klan, and Captain Canuck's preservation of Canadian sovereignty turns out to be the imposition of a political order on those who want no part of it. (Dittmer 2013, 160)

It is also possible to read satire, subversion, and political critique through techniques such as humour, self-effacing commentary, parody and nods towards genre conventions within superhero Hollywood films themselves – self reflexivity and self-referential nods in the superhero industry is quite possibly one of the most significant elements attributable to such immense success.

Chapter 2 denotes an important contextual component of this study with a demonstration of how a detailed character and narrative analysis can reveal parallels between the dominant images of superheroes and mainstream security paradigms. In mapping out these similarities, while not surprising or unexpected, the extent to which the popular narrative retains traditional/mainstream security discourse that prevailed during the Golden Age of comics is precisely why such analyses are important: utilizing the superhero as an analogy for International Relations, and specifically security, sheds light on the implications of constructed heroism in a political social environment driven by ideologies of fear and in/security, and its potential longevity and tenacity in both political and popular culture memories. A critical analysis destabilizes the historical construction of both the hero and security (it is thus both a critical interrogation as well as a pedagogical strategy). This chapter follows from insights of various critical security studies scholars (Neocleous 2008; Campbell 1998). Examining the highest grossing superhero movie in the genre with (USD) \$1.519 billion, *The Avengers* (2012) provides an important case study which offers unique value in containing a composite of the franchise's most popular characters in one "super" superhero movie and thus allowing for an analysis of the genre as a whole. While the film as a whole is set within the context of an archetypal security theme, this chapter is not, however, simply a tracing of the similarities between the dominant discourses of superheroes and security; it is simultaneously an exposure of their paradoxes. The superheroes in the Marvel films deliberately exist in a morally ambivalent world with greater complexity and nuance than the past. Within the overarching theme of freedom and security that dominates in the *Avengers*, for example, we can detect elements of ambivalence, nods towards an illusory

security⁷, more morally ambiguous heroes, and subversive elements; this is where this project recognizes the important socio-political role for critical engagement from within and towards popular culture.

In Chapter 3 I tie superheroes historically to war, war propaganda and military recruitment and trace how this relationship has functioned to politically and socially reproduce dominant attitudes towards militarism. Following an engagement with the militarization literature in IR, an examination of Hollywood's connections to the Pentagon reveals how the symbiotic relationship between these institutions influences the content of films in ways that deliberately shape the popular perception of the military. Militarization is shown to be intimately connected to social icons and popular mythology that gets reproduced in superhero films. While the spandex and capes prevalent in original caricatures of superheroes still, in many cases, remain common today, it is a hyper-masculine musculature of preposterous proportions and depictions of futuristic militarized armour or bodily extensions that is the modern superhero's iconic uniform. The fourth chapter further explores this embodied disposition of militarism and ties the performative and symbolic function of militarism to the superhero body and identity by unpacking various elements of superhero aesthetic characteristics. Superheroes remain, for example, on the one hand primarily white heterosexual males; however, the popularity of complex superhero identities such as animal-human hybridity and post-human cyborg machinations is emblematic of the potential variations of militarized masculinities that get variously mobilized for war. Further developing the analysis of "superhuman" permutations of the body, the discussion moves in Chapter 5 to further

⁷ Even though in typical genre format the superheroes "save the day" at the end of the film, nods towards inevitable sequels is one of the ways in which an illusory "security" is gestured towards.

probe militarized extensions of the superhero body, including the centrality of masculine power and militarized technology in origin stories. By interrogating the pervasiveness of advanced military technology that replicates or even inspires real developments in military research, the entanglements between popular culture, militarism, and politics are exposed on and through the altered, damaged and/or dead soldier's body.

This project was researched and written over a long period of time (much too long as many will attest) during which not only was there an onslaught of new superhero movie releases in a rapidly changing production environment within an exploding social media landscape, but also my own experiences of these films facilitated shifts in the way I was thinking about this research. Over time, my growing recognition of the conceptual baggage that I had carried with me throughout the initial stages of my research became impossible to ignore: I had set out, in a specifically cultivated manner, to write a thesis “demythologizing” the contemporary superhero film and exposing the way in which its similarities to IR and security studies functioned as an instrument of power imposing particular affectations towards advanced weaponry, militarism and hyper-masculinity. While indeed I maintain that Superhero films are powerful political entities and they represent the ways in which knowledge can be utilized and mobilized to maintain and promote oppressive and violent power relations, I have also over time become increasingly aware and able to hear and recognize readings of these texts that were disparate from my own; additional forms of knowledge “from the margins” that were being expressed in social media forums, memes, gifs, and so on, appeared to be forming active audience communities that were being recognized by film producers and ultimately altering future productions. Superheroes are powerful because their popularity

(and profitability) indicate the significance of socio-cultural values, dilemmas, and contestations and the discussion around which they provoke; they enable critical thinking and critical practices. Thus, such engagements have been necessarily incorporated as an important part of this dissertation.

This project thus should not be read as a critique of superheroes or superhero films; I am not asking what is wrong with superhero narratives, characters or bodies, but rather I am asking what they can reveal about us, how our socio-political environment and ideologies contribute and affect their creation and popularity, and how they in turn create our reality. Moreover, this is not a reading of superhero narratives but rather a critical engagement with the myriad aspects that are part of the entanglement of the politics of the popular: production, consumption, regulation, (mis)representation, affect, critique and subversion are all sites wherein a wider engagement with the political is possible. Interrogating the way in which superheroes are created, by whom, for whom, and why they become popular is as important as recognizing the multiple ways audiences react to, reject, and reconstruct the superhero. Attempts at understanding the narratives, ideologies, and images of the superhero and what they do for us exposes the superhero as a complex political entity that might just demonstrate how popular culture calls into question what gets counted as knowledge.

Chapter Two: Negotiating the Superhero as Political Artifact and Enabling Critical Thinking/Practices through Popular Culture

Popular culture, suggests Terrell Carver, has been resisted as worthy of academic analysis historically because it is subjective, requiring “too much interpretation” and therefore not constituting a reasonable source of knowledge: “pictures,” he claims “do not tell us much that is instantly determinate, unless they have captions, simply because they do not put their meaning into words” (Carver 2010, 424). Skepticism towards, or the outright devaluation of imagery and analysis of the visual form in IR has predominantly resulted in a dearth of serious study that engages with popular culture. Meaning is made and communicated, however, through both the visual and textual form, both of which are open to interpretation and contestation, and both of which require interrogating in order to understand practices of representation, reproduction, consumption, and our wider socio-cultural-political practices. In the words of feminist scholar Penny Griffin:

In counterpoint to those who might claim that analysis of popular and/or visual culture is not serious academic business, I would suggest that, to engage in any meaningful way with how we formulate knowledge about the world, and what therefore we know (or do not know) about the world, we need to consider the political processes of representation by which knowledge, reality and identity are selected, organized and transformed. Not only texts but images are central to our representations: in some contexts perhaps, images are today *more* central than texts in representing the world, in others, as Benjamin predicted, word and image are increasingly inter-dependent (1972, cited in Evans and Hall 1999: 7). By failing to consider the power visual language might wield, and the relations of power from which it emanates, we fail to also understand a crucial part of how people ‘know’ the world and how they then choose (or are able) to act within it. (Griffin 2015, 62)

It is in the recognition of the significance of subjectivity – as, for example, Guy Debord and Roland Bleiker have argued, that everything is a form of interpretation, distanced through representation (Debord 1992; Bleiker and Hutchinson 2008), and as Roland Barthes theorized, all images are polysemous (Barthes 1999 [1964], 37-38) – that we can

understand the interaction between an audience and the object as a political act and thus point to the image/visual as an important site for academic theorizing. The act of reading an image ‘politically’, explains Griffin (2015 60-65), necessarily rejects the false presumption of an authentic truth and is, through the deconstruction as interpretation, creating meaning.

A common problematic of the work of IR scholars working within the popular culture realm, however, has been to consider artifacts and/or the “popular” as primarily a useful heuristic device and treat it as “a screen onto which fantasies of a reified realm of the international can be projected or as a vessel into which theories, values or ideologies can be deposited” (Davies and Philpott 2012, 55). Such approaches (see Weber 2001; Nexon and Neumann 2006) “take an allegorical or mimetic view of the popular culture-world politics nexus” (Grayson, forthcoming 1) approaching artefacts as a “‘reflection’ of pre-existing and seemingly innate American values” (Dittmer 2013, 2). Such mimetic views create clear distinctions between the arena of politics and the arena of popular culture with popular culture artefacts as purely devices through which we can read and attempt to understand politics in the “real world” but ultimately “delimits and locates politics in a reified realm ratified by the state and interstate system and denies the politics of the complex of social forces expressed through and lived in popular culture” (Davies and Philpott 2013, 55). The way in which artefacts are chosen and analyzed also rely on “problematic assumptions about what world politics is and the ways that popular culture relates to world politics” argues Grayson, and “see (popular) culture as merely reflecting the self-evident dynamics of world politics” (Grayson 2015, 1).

This chapter diverts from this method and instead suggests that it is within the ambiguities, ambivalences, inconsistencies, and assumptions where images, as texts, contain their messages, and contextualizing and historicizing in turn reveals layers of meaning and significance. The multiple elements involved in constructing meanings and knowledges that impact one's reading position is specifically what makes images and texts always a negotiation; and this is what makes popular culture artifacts so valuable for critical engagement. As filmmaker, scholar, critical theorist, and self-named critical pluralist, James Der Derian explained in a recent interview, inter-disciplinarity, getting “outside the groupthink of academic disciplines,” and adopting heterodox methods is how critical security must move forward differently:

Political science is too busy looking in the rear view mirror, to prove how we got here with models and numbers, to deal with *now*. Meanwhile forecasting in security studies has become monopolized, even militarized, in the form of computer simulations and wargames. The future might be unwritten, but you've got to engage in some risk-taking, you have to look over the horizon, look beyond the disciplinary boundaries... When the world is changing so fast, we need to change our ways of thinking as well try to keep up with the objects referent. Otherwise we'll never get out of what looks to me like a permanent war, or at best an interwar, in which we fail to actualize any kind of real peace. (Interview 2016)

Der Derian, in this interview is emphasizing the necessary convergence between the social sciences and quantum physics, however his appeal for a multiplicity and interconnectivity of approaches in order to better understand global events (“the event itself but also how the effort to make sense helps make the global event – or worse, helps repeat it over and over again”) is where the impetus and contribution of this project is situated. The value of a popular cultural/aesthetic engagement with politics is an ethical engagement that diverges importantly from the rest of political and IR theory and practice, explains Bleiker:

It is not a black-and-white-ethics, one that clearly stipulates a set of rights, rules and regulations...When we look to literature, or to another art form, we cannot expect to gain clear answers. Nothing can absolve us from the need to draw our own conclusions and to take responsibility for them. But while art cannot tell us how to stop wars or prevent terrorism and genocide, it can give us insights into these experiences and the feelings we have about them. In so doing, art can shape the way we understand and remember past events and, in consequence, how we set ourselves the challenges we face in the future. (Bleiker 2009, 12)

Art is thus ethically relevant and politically necessary precisely, Bleiker explains, because it has the ability to “expose political practices whose problematic dimensions are no longer recognized because years of habit have turned them into common sense” (2009, 11). Moving outside of “politics” to analyze the political then is absolutely necessary because the inability to recognize that knowledge is contingent has a concerning historical precedent in IR: that knowledge, as Sylvester explained, “might best be seen as a powerful social practice rather than product of individual rationality” is central to the debates within IR that determined what could and could not be legitimate areas of study (2002, 6). Aesthetic approaches, Bleiker argues, “simply remind us to be self-aware and mindful about the politics involved in setting up principles and rules in the first place” (12).

This project maintains that superheroes, in their multiple, shifting, textual, symbolic, and visual forms, are political entities that allow us to make a deeper critique of the modalities and the consequences of militarization and (in) security. Superheroes are thus a site and repository of productive IR and security knowledge. The narratives involve violence and power relationships and reflect and project histories and possibilities of conflict, war, and terror. While they are political entities worth unpacking in their own right, they are also valuable pedagogical tools for the academe. Indeed, as Griffin explains, “...popular culture resides at the heart of understanding relations of

power in global politics. It would be careless scholarship to *not* take seriously how our lives, behaviours, assumptions and possibilities are formed within the popular” (2015, 67). While comprising the potential to deliver particular messages and coalesce with political aims, as we will see in the forthcoming chapters, artifacts such as the popular superhero also have the ability to be malleable, to be read in multiple ways, and to be dismantled and then reconstructed. The popular artifact, even when created without explicit political intent, always is already a political entity with the inevitability of its critical engagement.

What is a Hero?

Superheroes allow us to see the way heroic narrative conventions are used to maintain the status quo and reproduce existing power relationships – for instance as entities within regimes of militarization and (in) security – while also exposing their dissident critics and contributing towards the formation of alternate possibilities. This is how we can understand the significance of popular culture generally and superheroes specifically as “central sites of meaning-making”:

More than simply the by-products of a society or culture, they constitute how we know ourselves and how we believe ourselves to be valid...Popular culture texts may corroborate existing, and highly regulative, social narratives and assumptions, they may be tools of ideology and state, elite or group interest, but they might also offer important and subversive critiques of certain social narratives and assumptions (Griffin 2015, 67).

Thus, while superheroes may reflect societal conventions, they also importantly rely on audience connectedness to their meanings, which can influence beliefs and behaviors thus making them both economically profitable and politically useful.

Possibly the most significant site at which we can discern the inherent critical nature and function of the superhero figure is in the overarching and ever-present query:

what is a hero? This theme often underlies or drives the plot of a film, sometimes referencing real historical occurrences and provoking audiences to think seriously about our definitions of good vs. evil and the grey areas that lie between, and other times using humour and satire to do the same. Consider, for example, the tagline for *The Suicide Squad* (2016), where our superheroes who are commissioned by the US government as a task force of “the worst people on the planet” or “the bad guys” and called upon to tackle the government’s “dirty work”: “Worst. Heroes. Ever”. The hero in contemporary popular culture is a powerful figure that gets deployed in numerous ways, for profit, entertainment, political motivations, and to provoke critical thought. Questions around who gets labelled a hero, what is heroic, and how different brands of heroism get portrayed is both the prevailing plot device of popular superhero films and also the overarching problematic in foreign and local, security, humanitarian, and military policy.

Heroes have been one of if not *the* figure within cultural texts, both real and imagined that have been subject to humanity’s continual fascination and obsession.⁸ Analyses of “heroes” have been coming increasingly to the forefront as numerous scholars have acknowledged how the hero myth and the representation of the hero and their journey has been manipulated historically in ways that predetermine who gets to be the hero/protector and how labelling certain groups as heroes functions to reinforce dominant power structures. What does the heroism mythology do for us? If heroism is a mythology that gets rearticulated in distinctive ways trans-historically, what does the contemporary construction of heroism in superhero narratives and characters tell us about

⁸ It is relevant here to also note the largely messianic template from which most heroic images derive as well as their role as gods in Egyptian and Roman mythology, or the human warriors such as Gilgamesh, Rustam, or Rama (LoCicero 2008, 4).

ourselves in contemporary society? Mike Alsford, author of *Heroes & Villains* suggests that the hero (and its villainous counterpart) serves as an iconic receptacle for societies values, hopes, and fears: “What a culture considers heroic and what it considers villainous says a lot about culture’s underlying attitudes – attitudes that many of us may be unaware that we have, and which represent cultural currents that we may be equally unaware of being caught up in” (Alsford 2006, 2). Heroes, Alsford identifies, are a reflection of the continued self-identification with the ‘American monomyth’: “In this mythic narrative helpless communities are saved from oppression by an itinerant hero who always refrains from integration with the political community in which the hero just intervened” (Dittmer, p.115).

So, what is a “superhero”? In comics, pulp heroes such as The Shadow, Doc Savage and Ka-Zar were reality based characters yet fictional creations who preceded superheroes as we know them, as did stars of western genres such as Buffalo Bill and the action film heroes of Dirty Harry and Rambo, yet all contain the essential elements of fearlessness, luck, special “human” abilities and “superhuman” qualities. What then is the distinction when some characters are human but aided with advanced technology, some have god-like, magical or scientifically created powers while others, are, as Fingerhuth asks, “just plain brave/crazy/lucky”? (2004, 16) The following characterization might assist our attempt define this historically variable category:

...some sort of strength of character (though it may be buried), some system of (generally-thought-to-be) positive values, and a determination to, no matter what, *protect* those values. These are also, interestingly, the characteristics of a villain...So somehow, the superhero – more than even the ordinary fictional hero – has to represent the values of the society that produces him. That means that what, say, Superman symbolizes changes over time. In the 1950s, he may have been hunting commies. In the 1970s, he may have been clearing a framed peace activist against a corrupt judicial system. Either way – the hero does the right

thing. Perhaps more importantly, *he knows what the right thing is*. The superhero must also possess skills and abilities normal humans do not...One thing a superhero will usually *not* do, at least permanently, is die. (Fingerroth 2004, 16-18)

It is significant that such a definition includes reference to the social-political relevancy of superheroes at any given point in history as well as the malleability and *hyper-morality* of his moral code, based on both the audience's perspective and society's climate at the time. Nonetheless, in spite of the revisions and reconstructions of superheroes over time, shifting in complexity, nuance, irony, and self-reflection as the creators and media change as do social-political contexts, the narrative retains the core elements of the "American Monomyth," described by Lawrence and Jewett as follows:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition: the superhero then recedes into obscurity...It [the American Monomyth] secularizes the Judeo-Christian dramas of community redemption that have arisen on American soil, combining elements of the selfless servant who impassively gives his life for others and the zealous crusader who destroys evil...Their superman abilities reflect a hope for divine, redemptive powers that science has never eradicated from the popular mind. (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 6-8)

The superhero is archetypally both an extralegal force but also one that is almost never an "active agent for change", thus he is typically a reactive figure whose mission is not to "reform" but to protect (Fingerroth 2004, 161). As Reynolds further explains:

Heroes are generally obliged to defeat at least one supervillain per issue, but the events which lead up to the confrontation are normally initiated by the supervillain. The hero is in this sense passive: he is not called upon to act unless the status quo is threatened by the villain's plans...The superhero at rest may be nursing no unacted desires, and needs only to be summoned like a genie from a bottle in order to redress all moral imbalances. (Reynolds 1992, 50-51)

That our superheroes have "no axes to grind, no agendas to put forth and pursue" and thus his role is "akin to that of the idealized police officer in a democratic society" (Fingerroth 2004, 162) makes it even more essential to unpack what the status quo is at

any given time that the superhero is defending it. Moreover, as will be discernable in the chapters that follow, the monomyth or “heroic paradigm” is built on paradoxes, as

Lawrence and Jewett explain

...the monomyth betrays an aim to deny the tragic complexities of human life. It forgets that every gain entails a loss, that extraordinary benefits exact requisite costs, and that injury is usually proportionate to the amount of violence employed...The American monomyth offers vigilantism without lawlessness, sexual repression without resultant perversion, and moral infallibility without the use of intellect. It features a restoration of Eden for others, but refuses to allow the dutiful hero to participate in its pleasures...The monomythic hero claims surpassing concern for the health of the community, but he never practices citizenship. He unites a consuming love of impartial justice with a mission of personal vengeance that eliminates due process of law. He offers a form of leadership without paying the price of political relationships or responding to the preferences of the majority.

They continue:

In denying the ambivalence and complexity of real life, where the moral landscape offers choices in various shades of gray rather than in black and white, where ordinary people muddle through life and learn to live with the many poor choices they have made, and where the heroes that do exist have feet of clay, the monomyth pictures a world in which no humans really live. It gives Americans a fantasy land without ambiguities to cloud the moral vision, where the evil empire of enemies is readily discernible, and where they can vicariously (through identification with the superhero) smite evil before it overtakes them. (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 47-48)

Following from their affiliation from this traditional monomyth, the insights the ‘Super’-heroic might bring to our understanding of international relations, militarism and security is a weariness towards ‘super’ empowered individuals or nations entrusted with the privilege to help maintain norms and preserve the values of society - an unbalanced and unchecked aggregation of power.

The equivalent of such inordinate power and hypocritical morality with unparalleled superiority are reminiscent of the invoked moral and legal justification for America’s neoliberal colonial tendencies: “The 21st-century superhero” declares Hassler-

Forest, is a branded commodity associated with American national and cultural identity that has expanded to become a global brand and has been re-engineered to reflect the neoliberal policies and geopolitical interests of America today; that is, he is a “benevolent peacekeeper who stands for supposedly universal interests” who is “increasingly removed from discourses of pure nationalism and comes to present a universalized ideal in the context of global capitalism” (2012, 11-12). The superhero is, Dittmer similarly argues, simultaneously a *nationalist* brand which “actively cultivates a particular vision of the nation-state and its role in the world” (2013, 181). Moving from Hassler-Forest and Dittmers’ definition of the contemporary superhero necessitates paying attention to what this brand is, whose interests he stands for, and how this particular vision is implicated in the construction of our own individual and collective subjectivity. Recognizing that superhero creators/producers are also constructing a particular set of expectations around heroism and superhero idols that can then be subverted suggests that the superhero is a construct whose value also lies not just in his ability to produce enjoyment or perpetuate a particular narrative, but also in his ability to provoke critique.

There is an entanglement between the construction of fictional superheroes created with the purpose of eliciting an embodied affect and the construction of ‘heroes’ in our social and geopolitical realities – which is why understanding how discourses of heroism work and how heroes get constructed is of value. For example, by unpacking the hero/villain dichotomy that is central in heroic myths and maintained in popular culture figures, we begin to see parallels with constructed notions good and evil in North American foreign policy and how they get manipulated in heroic narratives. In their battles with supervillains, explains Fingerioth, superheroes “enact our own inner and

social dialectics about issues of life and death” (2004, 166) Key questions surface such as: What is the political purpose (and political ends) in naming particular subjects as heroic? How is ‘heroism’ a raced and gendered discourse? That is, who is it that gets to continually be the hero/protector and who is the protected/in need of saving and what kind of politics does this reproduce? Are heroes/villains really that different from one another? Who gets to determine when violence is legitimate, and, how does heroic authority function? Against whom and at what cost? Is there ever such a thing as real heroism and if so what does it look like? These questions are at the heart of critical feminist, IR and security studies, and yet as we will see in examples throughout the rest of this thesis, these are also the issues that filmmakers utilize in ways that promote, discourage, question, critique, make fun of, and subvert understandings of heroism.

Heroism discourses are discourses that structure our realities and thus are particularly important because of what they mobilize, what they conceal and because of the ways they can enable a re-scripting of any previous ethical or moral commitments. The language of ‘heroism’ obfuscates the deliberate constructing of who gets to be a hero, what their moral, legal or ethical code is that is being followed, what are justifiable actions, and who may not benefit from those actions. For example, the allocation of a kind of “super-citizenship to soldiers” (and increasingly the militarized police) as Lutz demarcates (2002, 731), is at the center of the troubling abuse of powers and erosion of civil liberties that is emboldened by and through discursive militarization and heroism. How the hero gets presented in opposition to a villain and how that villain gets codified as evil is of course central to how particular acts of violence get justified and by which means.

From the production aspect, any analysis of Hollywood must take into consideration profit as the primary motives driving Hollywood and the industry as both a business and political enterprise with corporate interests increasingly concentrating and commercializing the industry and executives reigning almost complete control over the entire production process (Boggs and Pollard 2007, 2-3). “Major studios in Hollywood such as Time-Warner and MGM” explains Dodds “invest a great deal of time and attention trying to predict likely audience reactions because making movies, especially the blockbuster variety, is big business and recouping their investment in terms of box-office receipts, advertising and related product marketing is a key objective” (477). The contemporary superhero Blockbuster is made for absolute mass consumption – the astronomical budgets of these films necessitate global success and universal appeal. This means that plots and characters are typically devoid of the *outright* racism, sexism, and nationalistic zeal that made the same comic book characters and storylines of the Golden Age so popular, and instead alter storylines to include fictitious or otherworldly villains, include (sometimes in vain attempts) women or ethnic minorities on their superhero teams, and involve “Universe” or “world” governing bodies as opposed to nationalist policing units. One example of this can be seen in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), where the makeup of his team (a “multi-ethnic and multi-national support team”) was an obvious attempt to appeal to international audiences. Additionally, scenes that could be read as extremely patriotic or amusingly satirical allowed for multiple readings at the same time that attempted not to alienate any one side of an intensely polarized political culture – a potentially deliberate move that indicates the prioritization of revenue over delivering any particular message. Thus despite the nationalistic jingoism audiences

were likely to associate with this comic book character, the filmmakers ensured a universal appeal by infusing his character with self-deprecating humour, self-reflexivity, and historical irony that invites non-American audiences (as well as the full political spectrum within America) to relate to the character. Whereas superhero comic books of the golden age could default to utilizing an entire country or ethnicity to represent the evil villain, for these big budget films it is imperative that sales are a global success and therefore filmmakers are often more imaginative or at the very least subtle when creating the threatening “other”.

Such enormous stakes in the success of Hollywood blockbusters is also why the characters that dominate the analyses that follow are primarily male.⁹ Of the dozen or so superhero blockbusters released in the past decade, female superheroes appear predominantly only as supporting characters or fellow team members. The 2004 film *Catwoman* was one of the only movie releases prior to 2018 in which the Superhero protagonist was a sole female and it was a flop, a blockbuster ‘bomb.’ Women in the superhero universe typically exist as supporting characters (girlfriends, mothers, daughters, team members) and filmmakers have a penchant for relying on the proven formula of inserting women as the hyper-sexualized violent sidekick; as the associate (or subordinate) she then becomes at some point the victim under threat and necessitating being saved by the “real” hero, thus reassuring the audience of the hero’s status and normative gender roles. Other times these women are written to have such morally

⁹ Producers are only beginning to see the potential market for real female superheroines: *Kickass* (2010; 2013), *Furioso* in *Mad Max* (2015), *Jessica Jones* in the Netflix mini-series (2015) and Marvel’s *Wonder Woman* (2017). There are indications within network television (*Supergirl* (2015), *Jessica Jones* (2015)) and the comic book industry (the new female *Thor*) specifically, that the future might hold promising potential for female leads.). Whether these additions are meaningful or simply female reproductions of the same “warrior-hero” is yet to be determined.

questionable origins or follow morally “weak” paths that they can never fully reach the status of heroine (See for example Black Widow in *The Avengers* 2012 or Jean Grey in *The X-Men* series). This gender disparity in the representation of heroic icons is significant in and of itself and it is also reflective of broader trends in society, and, as is demonstrated by the 2017 film *Wonder Woman* and will be discussed in Chapter 4, the potential for film studios to disrupt these tendencies.

Subversion?

Maybe I don't have a strong stomach, but every time I glance at this title, nausea creeps over me and I flee from it. [...] We are living in a time when nothing is what it seems and yet this guy can see through it all and decide what's evil. I also hate how he is portrayed as being truly good, and represents America. Therefore, we're supposed to think that America is truly good. (Andrew Aldridge, speaking about Captain America quoted in Gruenwald and Levins 1992c, 31; Dittmer 2013, 160)

Interestingly, what is becoming prolific in the Hollywood superhero industry, is an engagement with or at least acknowledgment of problematic heroism tropes exhibited within films created by both of the major producers of superhero movies, DC and Marvel Universe. This gets demonstrated through the characters (typically the superheroes themselves) or the dialogue, and has even been exhibited as a narrative plot device underpinning the whole movie through, for example, stimulating curiosity around the definition of a hero and the implications of relying on a single (or group) of self-identified “saviours” of humanity. This is a theme often repeated either openly as a part of the overall theme of the film (e.g. the *X-Men* series, *Captain America: Civil War* (2016)), exposed via tongue and cheek dialogue (e.g. *Deadpool* (2016)), or explored by revealing histories in which the superheroes themselves were at one point working for the “bad guys” (e.g. *Suicide Squad* (2016), the character Bucky in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), and even *Iron Man* (2008) which opens with Tony Stark as the private defense contractor supplying cluster bombs to rebel forces in Afghanistan). These

elements of ambivalence are often augmented by morally ambiguous villains, often whose character developments include rational aims and a tendency towards allowing the audience to empathize with them, and who are thus also fighting what they see as unjust “evil” and “criminality.” For instance Magneto from the *X-Men* series is a fully developed character with a horrific past that included his and his family’s internment in Auschwitz; similarly, Batman’s greatest enemy Ra’s al Ghul in *Batman Begins* (2005) is fighting the same elements as Batman, (with different means) but is ultimately rendered complex in ways that deliberately blur the lines between good and bad for the audience to contemplate.

“Heroes” in contemporary superhero films are more typically set in morally ambivalent worlds as individuals who aren’t simply “superhumans” with superpowers, but as figures who possess the necessary level of humanity and insight that enables the critical perspective to see the nuances and ambiguity in the world and be wary of claims of right vs. wrong. “Villains”, in turn, are created as increasingly sympathetic, provoking us as audiences to engage more critically with the heroism myth – a form of embedded and self-referential subversion that, as we will see in the next section, is becoming quite prevalent and appearing in a variety of forms. By provoking uncertainty, often inspired by such popular culture narratives, and questioning the orthodox answers and representations that may deepen our understanding of how such constructed narratives work to influence our understanding of world affairs. In asking how heroes are created and the ways in which heroes and acts of heroism affect policy and political outcomes, we are interrogating the work that heroic discourses do in society and how their

utilization in the media and popular culture can work to maintain or change the way we think about politics, violence, and the military.

Unpacking the Superhero as a political entity, however, also necessitates recognizing the complexity of the environment through which they circulate and the agency of those within it. The quote by Aldridge above, for instance, indicates a pervasive skepticism and incisive critique of the ideology and motives perpetuated by this “brand.” Engagement with popular culture from a political perspective that recognises pop culture’s essence as a site of expression that gets continually (re)negotiated inherently has subversive potential. One of the ways it does this is by recognising both the multiple and alternate readings any text is predisposed to and acknowledging the potential to manipulate and control affective narratives for social and political agendas. Throughout this thesis, I demonstrate how the Superhero is a flexible figure and adaptable monomyth that actively contributes to, reflects, and is a site of a gendered, raced and militarised politics that prioritizes technological advancement and violent solutions legitimized through a discourse of security and protection (righteous or hyper-moral violence). However, I also consider the ways in which both the creators and audiences are continually renegotiating the reproduction of entrenched paradigms and enabling critical practices through this subversion.

The use of satire, humour, critical sub-text, and irony in superhero films reveals a potentially greater ideological complexity, and at the very least, a significant and possibly intentional political ambiguity.¹⁰ Locating subversion, which can be deployed through

¹⁰ I think there is potentially significant insights to be gained by considering humour as an important site of inquiry; indeed, “funniness” as Jerry Palmer argues in *Taking Humour Seriously* (1993), is a legitimate object of study. However, what individuals laugh at, how, when and why they laugh is culturally, politically, and socially contingent and also significant. In the above analysis, I am not claiming to be able

dialogue, plot, and/or artistic elements, and can take numerous forms (parodic self-reflection, counter-narrative, humour, tone, casting, irony, and pointed critique) within what I recognise as for the most part, militarized and violent superhero narratives, characters, and bodies, complicates our readings of these films and may reveal potent embedded contradictions or deliberate transgressive inter-text tendencies. For instance, the development of parody explains Dittmer, can expose genre conventions in a new way and is a sign of the maturation of a subgenre and one in which its creators and audiences may be attempting to cope with a growing attachment from the reproduced ideology therein (2013, 160-161). Humour broadens an audience; humour also allows the filmmaker to include difficult subject matter but add a dose of the comedic to ensure an audience accepts it – in this way, socially driven plot lines that are contemporarily relevant allow audiences to relate, and the humour prevents isolating and polarizing an audience (this way one can avoid alienating protective parents, conservatives, liberals, globally diverse audiences, and so on). In terms of production, the superhero movie genre is based on comic book story-telling which is by its very nature a ‘heightened’ story-telling that brings ‘larger than life’ worlds to the screen – comedy and satire can help make this more acceptable. Add to this the tendency towards and popularity of a more gritty and realistic aesthetic and narrative along with reference to timely/relevant issues, and it makes sense that a little humour can alleviate dark material by providing a lighter tone. The arc typical of blockbuster narratives is to raise the tension to such a heightened

to identify every ‘funny’ moment in any one or all Superhero films, nor am I assuming that my reaction to a scene is universal or necessarily the one intended by the filmmaker. Moreover, I am not equipped (the cultural and humanities studies have made important contributions in this area) to tackle questions such as “how do we know that something is a joke”? How do we know it was intended to be as such? What is humour? (I believe it is not reducible to just one formula) Rather, I am providing my own account of where I have found humour in Superhero movies in order to complicate and perhaps shed to light on previous analyses.

point as to bring audiences to the brink of their seats – a period of suspension and tension which is ultimately unsustainable – and then to deliberately inject humour to ease tension but maintain the audience’s attention. This formula is clearly evident in *Iron Man 3* (2013) when the audience is subject to a plot twist and learns that the fearsome terrorist Mandarin, played by Ben Kingsley, was actually a cover – and a drunken, horny, wannabe actor – for Aldrich Killian’s evil company). Recognition that ratings are also taken into account by the production company in order to amass the largest possible audience means that humour is a useful tactic to allow particular scenes in a film while keeping a PG-13 rating avoid a profit dropping R rating. A common example of this is in scenes of torture (which always straddle the ratings issue), such as the opening scene of Black Widow’s torture in *The Avengers* (2012), which will be further unpacked in Chapter 2, where the tongue and cheek dialogue and cheeky role reversal succeeds in making a potentially terrifying situation into an entertaining and ultimately very funny encounter that includes psychological and physical torture.

Thematically, it is possible to identify several common areas in superhero movies that repeatedly exhibit humour in some way. These areas include scenes in which the main theme is terrorism, the use/misuse of weapons, violence/fighting/injury, and technology (these themes often crossover simultaneously). The humour can be present in various forms, including through dialogue, incongruous music, the tone of the scene, the characters’ facial expression or body language, and the relationship of the scene to the larger content of the film or even to the superhero genre as a whole. This humour is often directed at the sub-genre itself, inviting audiences to laugh at the genre with the genre, or as a way to “lighten up” historical legacies re-incarnated characters invoke (for instance,

Captain America: The First Avenger (2011) invites us to laugh at the character's "blatant chauvinism" through irony, self-deprecating humour, and reflexivity with regards to the genre's hyper-masculine traditions (Hassler-Forest 2012, 11)). Thus, humour is often constituted by and through the greater context of the film, and even the audiences' relationship to the storyline or character. More recently, there have been the release and success of several comedic superhero films whose entire leitmotif is to make fun of the genre of comic/superhero movies: *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014; 2017), *Deadpool* (2016), and even *Ant-Man* (2015) critique the genre in and of itself and the very elements which are both popular and intrinsic to the genre and yet silly and/or ridiculous. That the way in which "heroes" get portrayed and the mythologies popularized are being critiqued from within the very same popularized medium and genre within which they exist (and with similar Box office returns and attendance records) goes even further in demonstrating that such a popular culture artifact as the Superhero is loved, contested, and ultimately considered worthy of subverting and inverting.

There are significant parallels with these strategies to the ways in which humour can function in war in multiple ways: jokes in war time, some have argued, can operate as a way of releasing fear, or as a way to desensitize oneself in a situation in which one has to commit atrocities and confront on the ground the damage done to civilians in war-zones. And as Hassler Forest argues in his book *Capitalist Superheroes* (2012), the reason superheros are so popular is that they provide "symbolic representations of structures and values that help us make sense of lived reality, while avoiding any direct confrontation with the traumatic real" (13). Humour and amusement, argue Brown and Penttinen, may be an intrinsic part of the everyday experience of war. In their article "A

‘sucking chest wound’ is nature’s way of telling you to slow down...’: humour and laughter in war time,” the authors focus on military humour to exemplify how laughter is an example of the human experience of war which is not just that of victimhood, and a way of both individual release and resilience, which may function as a form of resistance (2013, 124). It can be a means by which to connect to a shared humanity or a shared experience of war – uniting combatants despite attempts to separate them, an experience of camaraderie and resistance to enemy discourses. It may also be seen to represent an “unofficial and subversive means of expression, freedom in the midst of restrictions”, a way to reflect an image on society that is very different from the one promoted by those in positions of power.

Ultimately, “the use of humour and laughter may serve a different purpose depending on one’s position in the war” (Brown and Penttinen, 2013, 125) - just as what one finds funny is contingent upon many different factors. When the German weekly *Der Spiegel* published a cover on February 18, 2002 that depicted George W. Bush and four of his cabinet members as superhero and action icons with the headline “The Bush Warriors: America’s Crusade Against Evil” (English translation), rather than the “outraged indictment” that was expected at such a “joke.” the President “was flattered” and requested thirty-three posters of the cover for the White House. The President’s response, as Hassler-Forest explains, is very revealing of the neoliberal aggressive foreign policy parading as a heroic and benevolent exemplary of the time: “Apparently, the notion that there was anything offensive about the depiction of American heads of state as bloodthirsty action movie icons and vindictive superheroes was completely alien to the Bush administration, nor was the ironic headline “America’s crusade against evil”

perceived as derogatory or sarcastic” (Hassler-Forest 2012, 1). It also points to the subjective nature of humour and satire and its political potential. In superhero movies, as in war, humour can be used as a subversive weapon that allows one to say the unsayable. We seek relief in the comic, perhaps to sublimate hopelessness into laughter; as Abraham Lincoln famously said, “I laugh because I must not cry, that is all, that is all”.

Just as Brown and Penttinen argue that military humour shows there is more to the human experience of war than killing, the humour deployed around militarized themes in superhero movies reveal there is more to representations of militarization, torture, and terrorism in film than simply its glorification of it, and attempting to comprehend such use of humour contributes to our understanding of the contradictions of militarization thus broadening and deepening the politics of war, power and violence. In his consideration of laughter in the Middle Ages, Mikhail Bakhtin explains its potentiality in liberating us from fear and opening our eyes to alternative possibilities: “Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor...laughter could never become an instrument to oppress and blind the people. It always remained a free weapon in their hands” (Bahktin 1984, 94). Laughter de-familiarizes discourses and events for their readers, giving readers license to disobey common expectations about what meanings a given text ought to generate. Attention is drawn to subtexts and double meanings embedded in texts. Bakhtin also warned, however, that parody also always relies on popular understandings of the generic conventions of a text, “a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text” (Dittmer 2013, 161). We are

thus wise to heed Rosemary Jackson's warning that fantasy has an embedded tendency to privilege the status quo, a theme repeated throughout this thesis:

...to attempt to defend fantasy as inherently transgressive would be a vast, oversimplifying and mistaken gesture. Those elements which have been designated "fantastic" – effecting a movement towards undifferentiation and a condition of entropy – have been constantly re-worked, re-written and re-covered to *serve* rather than *subvert* the dominant ideology (Jackson 1981, 175).

By liberating the interpretation of a text from the sole domain of its author's intentions, texts are re-motivated with plural interpretations.

Film is "bound up with social struggle by articulating opposing positions within society or transmitting social and political ideas" (Kellner 2011, 240), and humour (critical, satirical, ironic) complicates this – it makes it polysemic, inviting multiple readings, and allows political messages to be inserted into genre films (185) (As was mentioned earlier, it allows us to "tap into the cultures worries, fear and conflicts and provide narratives that address contemporary issues in a way to attract mass audiences" (182). This ambiguity allows for significant social and political allegory, but also reveals attitudes around militarism that are highly ambiguous – that is, rather than an obvious glorification of military technology, hyper-masculinity, and heroising of righteous warriors, the satire and abundant irony found in superhero humour may, for example: 1) invite us to question the limits and dangers of unrestrained militarism, 2) reveal fears about military appropriation of genetic engineering and biotechnology, 3) poke fun at warrior-masculinity, 4) critique the discourse of terrorism, 5) question the legitimacy of torture, 6) reveal the absurdity of weapons of mass destruction (a la Dr. Strangelove), and 7) poke holes in existing dominant theories of security, approaches to foreign policy, and common myths around notions of freedom, good vs. evil, and even the definition of a hero.

Give Them What They Want!

The recognition that audiences are also not necessarily passive viewers is also particularly important when considering the subversive tendencies exhibited in contemporary films: the internet has allowed a greater number of people to directly voice their dislike and respond through their own creative, satirical, mimetic inventions which can also be viewed by millions; subversion in the manufacture of alternative narratives as a sort of satirical de-legitimation from the democratic margins. We are seeing multiple ways in which individuals are fearlessly embracing the power of symbols, metaphor, and accessible media to reclaim popular culture as a political tool for the masses. The advancement and expansion of the internet and social media may be, as Henry Jenkins argues, shifting the power balance within the pop culture and media landscape to one in which the preferences and tastes of audiences (and in particular fan communities) are taken increasingly into account. He argues, fans increasingly “reject the idea of a definitive version produced, authorized and regulated by some media conglomerate. Instead, fans envision a world where all of us can participate in the creation and circulation of central cultural myths” (Jenkins 2008, 267). Avi Arad, the president of Marvel explains: “These fans love their movies and heroes like no other...And they’re very savvy with the computers. Word about your product gets out very quickly. If you can make a good impression here, your movie has hope” (Bowles 2004). “Here” is at San Diego’s comics’ convention Comic-Con – just one example of the ways film studios are attempting to appease fan communities recognizing how their vocal and opinionated presence can determine the success of a film, a necessity for Hollywood superhero

blockbusters which need to recoup their exorbitant production and marketing costs (Hassler-Forest 2012, 9-10).

The excessive use of violent explosions and the simulation of war-like conditions using special effects in superhero and action films for instance, has come under damning critique in the form of humorous memes and gifs. “Bayhem” for instance is the term used, in both reverence and mockery, to describe Michael Bay’s filmmaking style which relies on the excessive use of rapid and gargantuan explosions, chaos, rapid editing, and other film techniques in his films (which include *Pearl Harbour* (2001) *Bad Boys* (1995), *Pearl Harbour* (1998), *Bad Boys 2* (2003), *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011)) so that every screen shot is one of suspense and excitement. Or, as one critic (fan?) describes: “Spectacular explosions. Slow-motion running. Hot women. And sometimes all three together. No one goes to a Michael Bay movie expecting a sensitive portrayal of humanity – they’re in it for the Bayhem, that trademark blend of IMAX-sized [over-the-top] edited together for maximum impact” (Hawker). Bay’s trademark style has spawned internet gifs and humorous memes which, one could argue, provokes a more critical viewing of Bays’ films. For instance “18 Animated Gif’s that got the Michael Bay Treatment” and “Hilarious Michael Bay Gifs Spoof Director’s Love of Explosions” (Jones 2014) take classic Hollywood films or internet “fail” videos and subvert the filmmakers style with hilarious results.

The 2016 film *Deadpool* represents possibly the most notable example of the impact audiences can have, even on whether or not a particular film gets made. The film’s lead actor and co-writer/creator, Ryan Reynolds, has relayed openly how after struggling to make the film for eleven years it was only after the script and test footage

was leaked online that FOX Studios, inundated and overwhelmed by *Deadpool* fans, was essentially convinced to make the movie (Worthy of note, the film is deemed as fun, “bad-ass”, sexy, and excessively violent, but also deeply political, self-referential, and critical of the genre’s status quo). Whether or not the result of self-aware filmmaking and increasingly convergent and participatory popular culture may represent any sort of dismantling or even inquisitorial reflection of the superhero and his contemporary monomyth unpacked in this thesis is as yet unknown; that it suggests an opening for such self-reflexivity and democratic participation in our own socio-political narratives and realities is an important possibility within an increasingly complex popular culture-world politics continuum. Perhaps then the real value of taking superheroes seriously is that they are not just a fun way we might begin to understand the real problems with our current practices and ideologies, but our creation of, desire for, and enjoyment of the particular incarnation of superheroes in a specific geopolitical space can both represent a particular politics and mobilize others.

In the chapter that follows, the representational nature of a particular popular superhero film is considered in detail. Such an analysis makes visible the ways in which popular culture can reflect and be discursively entwined with politics. In demonstrating the striking similarities between dominant narratives of superheroes and security discourses, it is significant that the references that were popular during the Golden Age of Comics (and WWII) - including for instance, references to good vs. evil rhetoric and similarly the incorporation of traditional and militarized approaches to security - still permeate the popular culture landscape today. Though not necessarily surprising or unexpected, the popularity of entwining problematic and outdated paradigms to the

contemporary but also fictionalized complexities of modern issues must induce us to take seriously the extent to which such discourses and paradigms entrap us into limited and perilous ways of thinking.

Chapter Three: The Security Illogic and the Superhero: Interrogating the Connections between Hero Worship and the Normalization of Insecurity

Kickass: I thought we were trying to make the world a better place.
Night Bitch: Then why is it worse? (Kick-Ass 2, 2013)

What exactly is it that this unpacking of superheroes and politics allows us to see? Why is it useful for the field of IR? What can it tell us about ourselves? About the gender, race, and class power relations that are re-constructed and reproduced in our society? More specifically, in the contemporary global environment in which conflict is omnipresent, what can superheroes tell us about the ways in which we understand (and do not understand) militaries, violence, and war? About what we see and hear (and do not see and hear) regarding security discourses and practices? This chapter engages with the limits of security and heroism discourse, in both theory and practice, by critiquing the concept of “security” in and of itself, and arguing that the constructed concepts of security and insecurity form a dialectical relationship that is mutually symbiotic. This relationship is both reflected in, constituted through, and reproduced by mainstream popular culture texts, and through a critical engagement of such texts, we can gain better insight into how such concepts are both simply reproduced and cleverly re-imagined. As discussed in the previous chapter, these texts also utilize a variety of techniques in order to call attention to the complexity of such dilemmas as well as the ways in which they have typically been represented trans-historically within the genre; as we will see in selections of dialogue I utilize in the analysis that follows, contemporary superhero films present a more complicated picture of security, heroism, and militarism (though often in subtle ways) and in doing so succeed in illuminating certain security paradoxes.

The method of unravelling utilized in this chapter is to focus on narrative deconstruction, character development and film dialogue. As such, this chapter’s analysis

is primarily concerned with the politics of representation because, as Griffin explains, “Understanding the practices of representation through which our popular culture artefacts make sense to us requires interrogating the visual and verbal messages that are reproduced across popular culture” (2015, 61). Meaning is constructed, delivered, and negotiated through popular culture references that are already imbued with power hierarchies that get played out as a result of the structures of production. Thus deconstructing the symbolic (verbal and visual) messages in superhero films can give us insight into the meanings of security that are culturally produced and consumed.

This analysis aims to do this by addressing: 1) the conspicuous (and unsurprising) similarities in the dominant images and narratives of superheroes and security; 2) the problematic contradictions inherent in both superheroes and security, and 3) to argue that both are, like popular culture and politics generally, mutually constituted. Though the parallels discussed are not necessarily surprising, (superheroes have, as will be discussed in more depth in the chapter that follows, always existed in relation to militarism and war historically) by theorizing this relationship, it becomes evident that the maintenance of the myths around both superheroes and security are largely a result of the politics around their production that rely on popular dominant discourses that have become unquestionable in society. For example, both superheroes and security narratives rely on particular constructed ideas of morality and heroism that are tied to militarism, patriotism, warrior mythos, and violent masculinity. These myths have become so entrenched as reality that they have become hyper-moral, unquestionable, and immune to ideological negotiation. It is my belief that because of these similarities and connections, the superhero is an ideal tool to help us unpack the problems of “security”. By looking

differently at security (through the lens of popular culture) we can see it differently, and a more nuanced understanding of the inherent contradictions of security expose the problematic mythos that are reproduced in popular culture, thus maintaining their normative status.

The argument pursued follows from the insights of scholars such as Mark Neocleous, Michael Dillon, James Der Derian, Jutta Weldes, and David Campbell¹¹ who have revealed the “paradoxes of security”: that security can only exist in relation to insecurity; the production of identity and insecurity are mutually constituted; and, that security discourse gets deployed as security policy by those in positions of power often as a mechanism for maintaining power (which may ultimately render particular individuals insecure). Understanding these paradoxes reveals as problematic claims by governments that achieving security goals necessarily requires encroachments on personal freedoms and an expansion of state power. Such insights also suggest that who is rendered ‘insecure’ and who is deemed a security threat is determined by those who have the power at any given time to do the “defining” of security, ultimately calling into question the usefulness of the word for IR scholarship. These scholars have demonstrated how security discourse has become “unintelligible” (Shapiro 1992) and yet scholarship within this dominant ideology and its limiting paradigm continues to proliferate. Attempts to “broaden” or “redefine” security, for instance, continue to operate within and thus perpetuate an “illogic of in/security”. The never-ending pursuit of security, evident in the persistent calls for more/better/enhanced/increased security has rendered the world more insecure and certain subjects increasingly insecure (Neocleous 2008, 2). As a result, it has

¹¹ See Neocleous 2008; Dillon 1996; Der Derian 1995; Weldes 1999; Campbell 1992.

become nearly impossible to recognize the unintelligibility of security paradoxes, to expose our assumptions around security, and to challenge the accepted modes of thought and practice around security.

The starting point for confronting this dilemma, suggests Neocleous, is to interrogate the conditions for its unintelligibility; that is, we need to consider the multiple and various ways in which security and insecurity are *imagined* and how, in turn, the paradigm of (in)security has and continues to shape our social selves: "...to open up the analysis to the ways in which spaces and places, processes and categories, are imagined through the lens of insecurity, and in turn appropriated and colonized by the project of security" (3). This chapter argues that one of the most powerful spaces through which security succeeds in colonizing our social and political imagination is in contemporary popular culture texts. The difficult task of recognizing and unpacking the unintelligibility of security is made easier through culturally recognizable myths, figures, and narratives that are regularly reproduced in mainstream entertainment. These narratives are not only revealed to be dominant places within which the (in)security illogic circulates, entrenching it within our imaginations, our discourse, and our political and social practices, but are also far-reaching in the population and have broad appeal – a reality that suggests the extent to which the insecurity illogic has been accepted and normalized. Their popularity is significant in and of itself; however, such popularity also retains possibilities for a large number of people to join in this conversation. Popular culture is both a space for analysis and a useful tool in unpacking and challenging the security paradox.

This chapter engages in an analysis of the 2012 Hollywood blockbuster film, *The Avengers*. This selection was partially due to its iconic status within the comic world of superheroes and its significant role in Marvels' launch of a series of extremely successful superhero movies. Moreover, statistics verify that the film's popularity was not in question: as the highest grossing comic book film of all time (surpassing *The Dark Knight's* (2008) record), *The Avengers* was the first Marvel film to make one billion dollars, only the 12th film to surpass the one billion mark worldwide, and passed that mark in the fastest time (19 days) tied with *Avatar* (2009) and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2* (2011). In addition to its overwhelming popularity and successful profit margins, *The Avengers* is a critically important case study for a project on security and superheroes for three important reasons: First, the film is centered on familiar security paradigms which, I argue, revolve around inherent contradictions and thus presents a space for valuable critique. Second, the narrative is simultaneously analogous to the majority of contemporary Hollywood superhero films, which allows this critique to apply beyond this single film and more broadly to the genre as a whole. Finally, the characters in the film are, individually and as a group, deployed deliberately as an effective metaphor for the security state; thus, by questioning the deliberate construction and malleability of the notion of the hero it becomes possible to see securitization as a practice of power and control. In the first section, I will unpack the hyper-morality and the subjective representation of 'heroes' and interrogate the role of each of the superhero characters in *The Avengers* in sustaining an illogic of security. Section two unpacks the security discourse that dominates the film.

My intention is not to use the superhero as an analogy for foreign policy, or to read an interpretation of security through superhero narratives. Rather, I believe the existence of the superhero in and of itself is a reproduction of the illogic of security and such an interrogation thus functions as a *critique of security* and can therefore help us destabilize that which has become naturalized. If security is, as Michael Dillon has identified, a “technique of power” (1996, 16), then the Superhero is an instrument, sometimes deliberate sometimes unintentional, but almost always unrecognized instrument of that technique. Moreover, if as Bleiker argues, “rather than further entrenching current security dilemmas by engaging with the orthodox discourse that continuously gives meaning to them” we might escape the vicious circle in which discourse and practice are used to legitimize one another by forgetting, and thus open up possibilities for understanding and change (523). The superhero is a representation whose construction can broaden our understanding of world politics and who themselves can constitute political practice. This chapter provides an example of how a popular culture icon can reflect and reproduce our acceptance of the liberal security metanarrative and embody the paradoxical nature of the security function. In revealing the mutually constitutive relationship between the superhero and the illogic of security, the inherent problematic of security politics becomes visible and the need for moving beyond an illusory “security/insecurity” divide is clear.

The Exceptionalism of Hyper-moral Superheroes

“Victory, at the expense of the innocent, is no victory at all” – King T’chaka of Wkanda (Captain America: Civil War (2016))

In no figure is the idea that we are living in an “insecure” world better (re)presented than in the mythological figure of the hero. Images of the hero and their

villainous counterpart, explains Alsford, have “served as iconic receptacles for a wide range of cultural values, aspirations and fears” (2006, p.2). Our persevering obsession with valorizing some as heroic in the face of some “unnamed” threat or a threatening “other” functions as a reflection of our fears and the desire for some kind of “security” which is directly related to our imaginings of existing in an insecure world; in their battles with supervillains, explains Fingerioth, superheroes “enact our own inner and social dialectics about issues of life and death” (2004, 166). As mentioned above, if the “hero” can be thought of as the reflection of the normalization, trans-historically, of insecurity, then there may in fact be no better representation of our contemporary imaginings of insecurity than in the modern popular mainstream superhero:

Heroes are generally obliged to defeat at least one supervillain per issue, but the events which lead up to the confrontation are normally initiated by the supervillain. The hero is in this sense passive: he is not called upon to act unless the status quo is threatened by the villain’s plans...The superhero at rest may be nursing no unacted desires, and needs only to be summoned like a genie from a bottle in order to redress all moral imbalances. (Reynolds 1992, 50-51)

If, as Alsford argues, “what a culture considers heroic and what it considers villainous says a lot about that culture’s underlying attitudes” (2), then an un-packing of the popular superhero figure and its accompanying narratives demonstrates the extent to which the North American social space has become “saturated by ‘security’” (Neocleous 2) and may begin to shed light on the illogic of security. In *The Avengers* six superheroes each represent distinctive but integrally related elements of the security state and collectively pose as a proxy for the US security state post-9/11. Within this context, these characters do not simply present traditional elements of security ideology but rather provide remarkable introspection into the complexities of contemporary security practices and discourses and of their inherent paradoxes and contradictions. Our “security heroes” in

the film, several of whom audiences have been introduced to prior in previous films, include Thor, the Hulk, Captain America, Iron Man, the Black Widow, and Hawkeye, whom have all been summoned by the director of S.H.I.E.L.D.,¹² Nick Fury, as part of the Avengers Initiative, which has been reinstated in a declared state of emergency in response to an identified threat.

The hyper-masculine male warrior ethos is primarily embodied by the character of Thor who, known from his previous film *Thor* (2012) has an inclination to use force over diplomacy, a tactic that yielded unfortunate consequences and, supposedly served as one of the morals from that earlier film. Nonetheless, his character returns with a “might is right” approach. As Thor is a Norse god of Asgard, a small planetary body in another dimensional plane (Asgard, 1), his alignment in the film with the other Avengers on their mission represents security cooperation between nations, namely the US and its allies (Hagley and Harrison, 122). That this relationship is not without its tensions is made evident in the opening sequence where Thor faces Iron Man and Captain America. The resulting stalemate, explains Hagley and Harrison, represents the impossibility of victory in battle where the powers are equally matched and who “disagree but are not in opposition to each other” and symbolizes the “shifting and fractious relationship between the United States and her allies” (122). When Thor then joins the Avengers in spite of his relationship to the villain Loki, his adopted brother, and his origins from another planet, this is an alliance that resembles calls for a united approach required to fight the “new” war against terror as opposed to traditional interstate war.

¹² Defined as the “Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division”, an international peacekeeping agency.

Bruce Banner represents the importance of science and technology in a modern security state, as it is his human intelligence, in particular his knowledge of gamma radiation that makes him a useful appendage of the security initiative. However, it is his transformation into “the other guy” for the Avengers mission that presents an illuminating parallel for war. When he changes into the Hulk, explain Hagley and Harrison, he becomes “emblematic of the imperfect human response to crisis” (uncontrollable rage-fueled violence) and is a metaphor for “the desire to destroy anyone and everything that threatens his self-identity, security and safety” (121). When Loki’s strategy of releasing the Hulk as a weapon to self-destruct S.H.I.E.L.D backfires because the Hulk has learned to control his rage, the failure symbolizes and calls on the desire for a renewed American identity in the wake of post-9/11 foreign policy blunders: mighty but controlled.

Similar to the role Banner serves the team with his specialized knowledge, Tony Stark represents the critical role military technology and research and development play in the US security state, and in particular the increasingly important role of private military companies. Within the comic book universe and his own film franchise, Iron Man is commonly understood as a representation of the military industrial complex, which has been explored by author scholars (see Dittmer 2011; DiPaolo 2011) and which I explore thoroughly in Chapter 3. In *The Avengers*, however, Tony Stark has become quite critical of America’s methods of war, specifically rejecting the patriotic ideal of unwavering support for war and incensed by S.H.I.E.L.D’s methods and motives (specifically the audience learns of expansive intelligence gathering methods and the ultimate desire to acquire the Tesseract to build weapons). Stark’s newfound reservations

are situated in direct contrast to Captain America (Steve Rogers) who “represents traditional notions of patriotism and acceptance of authority”, and who, having been frozen in WWII when who the enemy was and the delineation between “us” and “them” was hypothetically much clearer, still retains this simplistic understanding of war. The discord between two characters who, throughout the film, are in a constant tug-of-war regarding authority, the government, and security strategies, explain Hagley and Harrison, “speaks to the tension between the traditional righteous protection of democracy and just war and the new, ill-defined kinds of warfare that test the nation’s devotion to civil liberties and human rights” (120). The tension between Tony Stark and Steve Rogers also, however, reiterates the ambiguity of the heroic, in particular gesturing towards the irony of each character’s heroic status as a result of scientific experiments for the advancement of military technology. Such an assessment is apparent in one of the many self-reflexive dialogues present in the film:

Steve Rogers: “You know, you may not be a threat but you better stop pretending to be a hero”.

Tony Stark: “A hero? Like you? You’re a laboratory experiment Rogers. Everything special about you came out of a bottle”. (*The Avengers* 2012)

In contrast to Tony Stark, Captain America/Rogers clearly represents traditional methods of war, patriotic duty and military honour. Having been previously introduced to Hollywood audiences in his own character feature film *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) as the ideal patriotic citizen and military hero (discussed in Chapter 3), in *The Avengers* Rogers is disillusioned by the state of his country (“When I went under, the world was at war. I wake up, they say we won. They didn't say what we lost.” (*The Avengers* 2012)), out of touch with society, yet still a dutiful soldier who believes in operational hierarchy (“We have orders! We should follow them!” (Ibid)) and

maintaining unwavering support for one's country and their wars. When Loki first encounters Captain America, his quick-witted description of the Captain as "The soldier. A man out of time" has a triple meaning, the Captain being both in a different era than accustomed to, potentially out of time to escape in light of Loki's threatening advances, but also an old fashioned soldier accustomed to the old ways of war and failing to understand the new era of terrorism, high-tech battles, civilian terrain, and state electronic surveillance. Indeed, the audience witnesses his acceptance of authority and reverence for his country falter when he searches for answers regarding S.H.I.E.L.D's activities and presents the weapons of mass destruction the organization had been secretly developing to the team. What is particularly significant, however, is that throughout the film the Captain adapts to the new era of blurred ethics and "redefines his patriotism" in spite of the discovery of "questionable" military developments (Hagley and Harrison, 120):

Tony Stark: WE ARE NOT SOLDIERS! I am not marching to Fury's fife!
Steve Rogers: Neither am I! He's got the same blood on his hands as Loki. Right now we've got to put that aside and get this done. (*The Avengers* 2012)

This interaction is particularly important: it is at this narrative juncture that the team recognizes that they have been deceived by Fury and thus begin to distance themselves from what they determine are possibly immoral objectives and methods being utilized by Fury and S.H.I.E.L.D; the irony is that this problematic morality which accepts war and violence as inevitable is embodied within their very ontology as superheroes, and thus the way in which they engage with the Universe. It is also significant that it is the Captain, the soldier who ultimately strategizes the winning battle, and thus presents the soldier who, when finally in command of his team, is the ultimate hero. This is captured most

clearly in the final battle scene that begins with the Captain regaining full authority, commanding his team in battle and ends with the final command for destruction:

Iron Man: [as the fight begins] Call it, Captain!

Captain America: Alright, listen up. Until we can close that portal, our priority's containment. Barton, I want you on that roof, eyes on everything. Call out patterns and strays. Stark, you got the perimeter. Anything gets more than three blocks out, you turn it back or you turn it to ash.

Hawkeye: [to Iron Man] Want to give me a lift?

Iron Man: Right. Better clench up, Legolas.

[Iron Man takes Hawkeye up to the roof]

Captain America: Thor, you gotta try and bottleneck that portal. Slow 'em down. You got the lightning. Light the bastards up.

[Thor swings his hammer and flies off and Captain America turns to Black Widow]

Captain America: You and me, we stay here on the ground, keep the fighting here. And Hulk?

[the Hulk turns and glares at Cap]

Captain America: Smash!

[Hulk grins and leaps away] (*The Avengers* 2012)

Finally, Hawkeye and the Black Widow further complicate the moral ambiguity of The Avengers team and deepen the security illogic. Both spies who have worked previous missions in Eastern Europe, Hawkeye is a hired assassin whose specialty is stealth killing – a trade not typically considered heroic. Very early on in the film Hawkeye is “turned” by Loki, symbolic, perhaps, of the accusations post-9/11 of terrorists being “brainwashed” by their leaders and brainwashing their followers, or of the US concerns over its prisoners of war. Hawkeyes’ dual role fighting both for and against The Avengers in addition to representing the private contracting of soldiers as a “superhero for hire” highlights the grey area of war and heroism and in particular the “moral confusion inherent in the role of espionage in the face of “war”” (Hagley and Harrison, 121). This is, of course, another clever plotline that is ultimately resolved as acceptable as a result of Hawkeyes’ heroic stature.

Black Widow/Natasha Romanoff is the only female character that plays a superhero role in this film which, in and of itself, transgresses the normative gender roles in hero mythology where women are the victims needing to be saved, often functioning as “motivation for the [male] hero’s journey, rather than as characters of substance in and of themselves” (Stuller 2012, 237-38). Her character is not, however, a progressive female superhero, but rather more closely aligned with typical female action heroes, as is discussed in Chapter 4. The violent, seductive, and hypersexualized depiction of Black Widow is integrally connected to the normalization of a particular masculinity that dominates security policies and discourses, and of the sexism that perseveres in Hollywood. “The super ninja woman is active” explains DiPaolo, specifically referencing the hypersexualized Black Widow, “but scenes of her leaping about in a cat suit, beating men into submission...are specifically designed to make viewers wonder: “What would it be like to have sex with *her*?”” (43) While it is worthy of note, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, that more female superhero characters now appear in popular culture than ever before, in their most common form they are typically little more than “functionally the male reader, but dressed in a too-perfectly proportioned ‘wet dream’ female body...the male reader himself and the male reader’s sex fantasy all at once” (44) As Famke Janssen, the actress who plays Jean Grey in *X-Men* (2000) and Xenia Onatopp in *Golden Eye* (1995) reasons, female characters are created sexy and are thusly popular because “women want to *be* them and men want to *do* them” (DiPaolo, 43). Such highly misogynistic representations of female characters, states Miettinen, contribute to the reinforcement of a superheroic masculinity that is “white, heterosexual, muscular, and violent” (2014, 105).

A former Russian double agent, the Black Widow is depicted as cunning, sly, and extremely skilled at deceiving others (as is made clear in, for example, the introductory scene where it appears as though she is being tortured and interrogated when in fact she is the interrogator and in one of the most climactic scenes of the film where she manages to trick Loki into unveiling his strategy). Manipulating, scheming, and simultaneously beguiling are stereotypically thought of as “dangerous” feminine/emotional traits considered deleterious to the “rationality” of war-fighting. Her character then serves to suggest that there is no tactic that is out of bounds in war; security threats warrant the use of any means possible and the Black Widows’ success in both of the scenes mentioned above serves to justify the means used. In addition, her presence on the Avengers team in spite of her less than honourable past and “untrustworthy” and “shadowy” nature, further suggest that the potential gains to be made in war justify morally dubious means. It is Loki who, speaking to the Black Widow, insists that they are no different from each other, calling into question the distinctions we create between heroes and villains, and the justification of behaviour through the construction of moral and ethical codes: “You lie and kill in the service of liars and killers. You pretend to be separate, to have your own code, something that makes up for the horrors. But they are a part of you, and they will never go away!” (*The Avengers* 2012).

All of the Avengers characters described above are particularly worthy of note as metaphors for security because of both their flawed nature as well as their ambivalent, reluctant, or at times even critical attitudes towards their heroic status and the mandate of S.H.I.E.L.D. Interestingly, research on historically admired heroes reveals that their heroic status could be described as at most ambivalent. In fact, the majority of heroes that

were worshipped in the past were morally ambiguous at best, insidious at worst. Hughes-Hallett writes in her book *A History of Hero Worship*: (2004):

Virtue is not a necessary qualification for heroic status: a hero is not a role model. On the contrary, it is of the essence of a hero to be unique and therefore inimitable. Some of the people whose stories are told [in this book] were irreproachable, others were scoundrels...But heroes are not required to be altruistic, or honest, or even competent. They are required only to inspire confidence and to appear, not good necessarily, but great. (2004, 4-5)

Thinkers like Aristotle, Thomas Carlyle, and George Bernard Shaw warned of the “potentially pernicious effects of hero worship” (5) and of the political dangers of admiring an “exceptional few”, and of the dangerous power that goes with it: “There are men,” wrote Aristotle, “so godlike, so exceptional, that they naturally, by right of their extraordinary gifts, transcend all moral judgment or constitutional control” (6). The very notion of the hero then is dangerous, or as Hughes-Hallett claims, “radically inegalitarian”, potentially opening the path to tyranny (5). Moreover, history reveals that heroes tend to materialize in times of emergency, in a time of desperation. Historically, heroes were not necessarily “good” men, or the “virtuous” men, but *warriors*, rebels, traitors, and insubordinate, who, by right of their objectification and worship transcend moral judgment. As Aristotle wrote, “There is no law which embraces men of that caliber: they are themselves the law” (6).

While the idea of a hero, then, is largely abstract, an ambiguous and constructed concept where who and what is deemed heroic differs from groups, individuals, geography, culture, and is not based upon a universal code, the heroes of classic

mythology and modern legend are predominantly male¹³ and militarized.¹⁴ The admiration of morally ambiguous warrior heroes of the past perseveres in the contemporary adoration of superheroes with flexible ethical codes, and it is this moral ambiguity that is a significant aspect of their function in the illogic of insecurity. As Hallett-Hughes writes, dead heroes are usefully malleable as “their images have been pressed into service as often by revolutionaries as by defenders of authoritarianism” (10), and superhero figures are similarly pliable. While in the golden age of comics superheroes were typically thought to have embodied an “ideal type” of black and white morality, what is particularly intriguing about the contemporary incarnation of superheroes is their straddling of the grey zone of morality and exhibiting ethical uncertainty. That is, vigilantism, vengeance rather than justice, use of excessive violence, surveillance, manipulation, enmity and narcissism are, to name just a few, prevalent character traits of the contemporary superhero that presents while failing to function as a threat to their heroic status. Consider, for example, the blatantly immoral Tony Stark, who in spite of or potentially *because* of his relationship with capital, women, and the military industrial complex, he is considered heroic. What is important to note here is that the “less than virtuous” (Hagely and Harrison, 120) characteristics of the Avengers heroes, including primarily their use of violence, their vigilante status, and their moral

¹³ While there are indeed women who have historically reached the status of a hero, their numbers are exceedingly disproportionate to the number of males who have been the vast majority of those accorded hero status. Throughout most of western recorded history women, points out Hallett-Hughes, have “been considered incapable of running a country, let alone saving one” (9).

¹⁴ There are of course, various distinctions regarding the classification of heroes across different eras, geographies, and from a variety of perspectives. For the purposes of this thesis, I have selectively chosen to reference those of Western mythology as they are predominantly drawn upon for the origin of contemporary superheroes.

ambiguity is not presented in *The Avengers* or other contemporary Superhero films as necessarily good or bad, but rather as reality.

In the superhero universe this exceptionalism prevents the destabilization of hero worship: the morally ambiguous traits exhibited are not presented as ultimately problematic or troubling, but at most part of a journey of self-discovery during which our hero's battle with morality is utilized as a technique that earns our empathy. Rather, heroic status in and of itself functions as the legitimization for "superheroic" action - whether this be the use of invasive surveillance technology, the loss of innocent casualties, or the extreme use of lethal violence. As Hassler-Forest argues in his book *Capitalist Superheroes*, the superhero's actions are also always justified by not only their cultural iconic and fictional public status, but also by the narrative's outcome: "...the fact that the narratives consistently demonstrate that masculine power figures use such abilities for good justifies their existence and contributes to their public acceptance" (186). Jason Dittmer uses audience research to show audiences' acceptance of this hero exceptionalism. He argues "avoiding the shackles of governmental authority is a longstanding theme of super-heroism," thus perhaps what is so satisfying about superhero exceptionalism is that an "unelected, law-transcending figure" can exercise superpowers and violence because the superhero world is a fabricated world of clarity and moral certainty with "recognizably othered enemies and adversaries" (Dittmer 2011, p.116).¹⁵ Thus, while we empathize while watching our heroes struggle to decide what is "right", it is always, through the administering of "righteous violence" the superhero enables a

¹⁵ It is worth noting that "recognizably othered enemies and adversaries" is not always the case; for example in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) James "Bucky" Barnes is a brain-washed super-soldier who, along with other captured "winter soldiers", can be activated to carry out actions on demand, blurs the line between enemy and ally.

catharsis: “There is a comfort of sorts to be found in the belief that someone out there has both the power and the ethical certainty to judge and to punish with transcendental impartiality” (55).

Dittmer’s study of audience reviews on IMDb are in this respect quite telling: although it was determined that reviewers engaged with almost every aspect of the films, including disapproving their physicality and actions for “not being masculine enough”, questioning visual effects, recognizing biblical references, or even criticizing the celebration of military technology, never were superheroes questioned for exercising power and violence in an undemocratic fashion; in fact their exceptionalism seemed to be universally accepted: “Acceptance of the superheroes’ role in producing order in a dangerous world was universal” (Dittmer, 126). Despite then, as I have shown, their moral ambiguity, superhero exceptionalism is standard, unremarkable, and most importantly accepted.

The rhetoric of military intervention and national security discourse relies on a similar notion of “exceptionalism”: it is the deliberate construction of the “virtuous” and “heroic” soldier which underpins the logic that informs society’s acceptance of and passivity towards ‘questionable’ actions of individual soldiers specifically and the military generally.¹⁶ Our acceptance of “morally ambiguous” superheroes who are justified in administering a sort of ‘righteous violence’ in our eyes, is precisely where we can begin to see how the hero/villain, good/evil dichotomy maintained in popular culture narratives is really more of a messy gray area and presents strikingly familiar parallels with dichotomized constructions of good and evil in international politics and security

¹⁶ Feminists have been key in shedding light on this issue. See Whitworth (2004), Enloe (1983, 1993, 200), Tickner (1992), Peterson (1992), Cohn (1987, 1993), Cockburn (2004).

discourse and policy. Who gets to be the hero is deliberately although not always consciously determined based on gendered and raced norms and is constructed in opposition to the dangerous “other”. Superheroes are thus constructed not necessarily as “morally righteous” individuals, but rather as symbols of unquestionable goodness and physical “warriors” with the power, responsibility and (ultimately) legitimized authority to “protect” and “secure” against an ever-present threat using whatever means *they* deem necessary. The us/them binaries are inherently problematic colonial narratives and the language of difference enables, conceals, and perpetuates race, gender, and class based violence that gets employed as a means of garnering support for war, bolstering national pride and patriotism, and most importantly increasing military recruits.

The persistent articulation of an “existential threat” that functions (in both political and superhero discourse) to justify the use of violence relies on such an attribution of difference to the “other”. The difference articulated between the heroes and villains in their physical bodies, origin stories, and battle tactics are important techniques utilized to create a caricature of the dangerous other in stark contrast to the hero and those worthy of being saved. The villain, equated with the dangerous other, gets deployed as 1) evil from birth, or inherently immoral, with an overt disregard for the lives of others, 2) dangerous and unpredictable, 3) power hungry and vain, 4) a representation of our darkest instincts, flaws, and fears and, most importantly, 5) essentially different from us and thus unknowable. Representations of villainous “others” are ultimately objectifications of our epistemological fear of ‘the void’ – our inability to know death through which we attempt to transcend our fears by concretizing them into dangers or enemies that we can know, fight, and destroy:

Facing this void is unbearable. In modernity, human beings constantly hide it, keep it at a distance. To do this they literally objectify it. They create objects about which they can develop 'true' knowledge. The general category of death is displaced by concretized danger, inimical forces ranging from the devil to criminals and rival states...Once death is concretized, the fear of the unknown transcends into a fear of the concrete enemy or danger. (Huysmans 1998, 237)

The possibility of death signified by the fear of danger functions to also construct the identity of political communities, explains Huysmans, or as David Campbell and others have shown, discourses of danger that rely on articulating difference have been utilized and manipulated to (re)construct, re-imagine, and re-enforce national identity and political community. The danger of a damaged identity in the face of the loss or absence of threat has been articulated by several scholars who have demonstrated how the US managed the loss of its big, concretized 'bad guy' (the Soviet Union and the threat of communism) by identifying "a new force of evil against which it can articulate its difference and therefore its political self" (239; See also Weldes and Saco, 1996; Campbell 1992, 1993; Der Derian 1992: 173-202; Shapiro 1992b). This relationship between identity and the articulation of danger illustrates an essential paradox of security: "Our political identity relies on the threatening force of the other; nevertheless security policy aims ideally at eliminating this threat; if the threat were really eliminated, the political identity would be damaged...it may very well collapse" (Huysmans 1998, 239-40).

The villainous character is such an imaginary concretization, and provides the opportunity for a limitless and interminable articulation of threats in that he/she can elude death and can be embodied by an infinite variation of forms.¹⁷ Typically presented as

¹⁷ Interestingly, towards the end of *The Avengers*, the audience is introduced to "the Other", who is the intermediary through which Loki communicates with his ally "Thanos", a powerful alien warlord who rules over an unknown area of space and commands the alien army the Chitauri. His name appears to be based

insane, power-hungry, and tyrannical with a resolute desire for chaos, anarchy, and/or world/global domination, the villain represents any number of a populations' fears and hatreds and takes a number of forms physically (if shown in more than an ominous shadowy form at all), and is often adept at transforming into different shapes, further signifying shiftiness, untrustworthiness, and the fear of the unknowable. If in a human type form, normative characteristics of "beauty" are typically absent, the villain being either pale and thin, or obese and revolting with features typically associated with evil (narrow eyes, angular face, exceptionally dark features) often resembling a devil, and most importantly is of a different ethnicity or from a different country, planet, or universe. The villain is thus placed in clear and direct contrast to the relatable, flawed but ultimately hyper-moral superhero.

Loki, for example, is presented as physically unimpressive (even ugly) compared to the other characters, jealous and, as an adopted son, an outsider from birth. He is presented as not simply desiring power but desiring the recognition and adulation of being powerful. He is vain (which ultimately sets in motion his own undoing) and intoxicated by his own inflated sense of power, self-worth, and entitlement ("There are NO men like ME!"). His techniques of trickery, brainwashing, and seeming disregard for human life are portrayed as unethical because of the apparent enjoyment he gets from waging war. He is, according to S.H.I.E.L.D, different from the other superheroes and different from the humans on earth. Several allusions are made to Loki as a "terrorist", namely in his repetitive discourse associating "freedom" with chaos and his role in saving humankind ("Is not this simpler? Is this not your natural state? It's the unspoken truth of

on the classical Greek word "Thanatos" meaning death. It is together with Thanos that Loki invades earth using the Chitauri ("Thanos").

humanity. That you crave subjugation! The bright lure of freedom diminishes your life's joy in a mad scramble for power, for identity" (*The Avengers* 2012) and in his strategy "to divide, to terrify, and to unleash anger and hatred that decimates the previous harmony of a group and demands revenge" (Hagley and Harrison, 122).

Interestingly, many of the "villainous" traits that manifest in Loki are, as has been noted above, recognizable in The Avengers team and similar tactics are utilized by the Avengers and/or S.H.I.E.L.D as part of their strategies in war. For instance, both Iron Man and Thor are vain and arguably power hungry, the Hulk is extremely dangerous and unpredictable, and all of the superheroes appear to enjoy fighting (Iron Man in particular thrives on employing and exhibiting his military equipment or "toys") often making jokes during battle (fight sequences in the Marvel Universe are, interestingly, always quite humorous in addition to suspenseful and aesthetically impressive). Fury makes clear that S.H.I.E.L.D utilizes methods of torture, expressing the belief that it is both justified and effective, responding calmly to Thor's insistence that Loki will not be stopped by such methods "A lot of guys think that...until the pain starts" (*The Avengers* 2012). Disregard for human life or the expendability of particular lives is exhibited in S.H.I.E.L.D's stockpiling of weapons of mass destruction and the council's deployment of one such weapon - indicative of the willingness to sacrifice particular subjects in the name of "securing" others and the status quo. Ethically questionable methods are repeatedly utilized and justified: S.H.I.E.L.D is exposed as operating an elaborate intelligence-gathering mission that includes spying on the entire American population ("We're sweeping every wirelessly accessible camera on the planet, cell phones, laptops..."). This is typical in contemporary popular narratives, explains Hassler-Forest, in which the

protagonist's "unquestioned heroic status" is "legitimation for the panopticism of the post-9/11 surveillance society" (186) (consider the television series *24* (2001-2010) and *Homeland* (2011- present)). Advanced surveillance mechanisms are often even an essential part of the superhero's character (See Chapter 5) in the form of cyborg-like technologies where, as Hassler-Forest explains, "the fact that the narratives consistently demonstrate that masculine power figures use such abilities for good justifies their existence and contributes to their popular acceptance" (186). The expansion of "intelligence" is an example of how security functions as the mode of governing and a technique of power; the public is much more likely to accept an increasing mandate for security if it is considered a form of "intelligence" gathering and in a time of "exception" (superhero narratives are always already operating within this "exceptional" space). Thus, while Loki is demonized for his desire for power, S.H.I.E.L.D is ultimately launching the Avengers Initiative and developing weapons and surveillance mechanisms in order to *maintain* power in spite of an incredible lack of accountability and oversight.¹⁸

Justification of the 'hero's' actions are made possible because of the dangerous/evil/alien 'other', that is made real through fabricated fears and anxieties of disorder and insecurity, in opposition to an imagined 'secure' national identity. "Insecurity" thus can justify even the "righteous display of satisfyingly brutal bone-breaking vengeance" which "the modern vigilante", explains Morrison, utilized "to leave his criminal enemies hospitalized or even permanently disabled" (2011, 251). Are such actions examples of security/heroism, or are they the violent pacification of a villainized "other"? The cognitive boundaries that define subject identities in opposition to each

¹⁸ It is this very theme that Marvel takes up in the sequel *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) which revolves around the Sokovia Accords, an oversight mechanism to control the Avengers.

other is one of many techniques of security, and the following section will explore further how the contradictions and paradoxes of security can be illuminated through the ironies present in heroic narratives.

Superhero Security Narratives

“We need to be put in check, and whatever form that takes I’m game. If we can’t accept limitation, we’re boundary-less, then we’re no better than the bad guys.” – Tony Stark (Captain America: Civil War (2016))

Interrogating the exceptionalism of superheroism and the dichotomy between heroic and villainous characters in *The Avengers* reveals how the discourse of security functions to obfuscate its many paradoxes and contradictions, such as how the construct of a hero/superhero implies a “hyper-moral” code that justifies violence against the other. Unpacking this us/them binary in the film shows how a deliberately constructed and then constantly rearticulated myth that relies on the mobilization of difference can function as a technique of security: the exceptionalism of the superhero as a hyper-moral benevolent protector ultimately renders their power and use of force justifiable and their role in maintaining order desirable under the threat of disorder of the status quo.

Security discourse pervades the film and saturates the overall plot of *The Avengers* as well as the majority of the Marvel Universe: the world is threatened by an “evil/foreign/alien” other and the superhero(e)s (constructed in opposition to the other) are burdened/honoured with the responsibility to secure the status quo of the city/nation/earth in the name of freedom and security. In this state of exception, violence, surveillance, and weapons proliferation is justified by the morally superior (although ambiguous) superhero, their defensive positioning, and the resulting, always victorious ends that avoid any unjustifiable costs. Un-packing this meta-narrative of security as presented in *The Avengers* demonstrates the saturation of security discourse in our

popular culture and exposes the multiple contradictions of the liberal security state. I will briefly explore how such narratives function as a technique of security while simultaneously maintaining the illusion of the possibility of “security” while obscuring the potentially pernicious effects of security strategies.

The constant articulation of a threat or danger is in essence the crux of superhero narratives, making the superhero universe an enduring “state of exception”: a cinematic representation which serves to project the United States as perpetually under threat of attack and in need of defense readiness. The idea that we entered an era of a “permanent ‘state of emergency’” was dominant after 9/11, which, explains Neocleous, allowed those with the prerogative of power to create a space in the interest of good order and security for “emergency powers” to become normalized and for the “exception” of violence exercised through emergency powers (8). In *The Avengers*, this theme is clearly evident when Nick Fury justifies using the Tesseract’s power to build weapons by citing events in New Mexico a year earlier (recounted in *Thor* 2011) that made SHIELD “aware of other races on other worlds, some of whom may see the Earth as an easy target” (Synopsis):

Bruce Banner: I want to know why SHIELD is using the Tesseract to build weapons of mass destruction.

Nick Fury: Because of him!

[Points at Thor]

Thor: Me?

Nick Fury: Last year, Earth had a visit from another planet that had a grudge match that leveled a small town. We learned that only are we not alone, but we are hopelessly, hilariously outgunned.

Thor: My people want nothing but peace with your planet!

Nick Fury: But you're not the only ones out there, are you? And you're not the only threat. The world is filling up with people that can't be matched, that can't be controlled! (*The Avengers* 2012)

This “alien invasion” theme, as has been coined by other authors (see Robb 2004; Loffmann 2013), is a mainstay of Hollywood blockbusters that successfully “reproduces

a basic Manichean narrative of American innocence”, constructs an “unambiguous identity of American exceptionalism and soldierly heroism against the ultimate threatening other”, and demonstrates the importance of military superiority (Lofflmann, 7). Such representations also manifestly link American identity to danger while neglecting the problematic role of interpretation in the articulation of danger; as Campbell explains, the determination of a threat relies on the role of interpretations of danger that form around referent markers such as ‘alien’ or ‘subversive’ rather than the incidence of ‘objective’ factors (1998, 2-3). Moreover, the impetus for an interpretation of danger does not necessarily require a crisis, attack, or event:

...there need not be an action or event to provide the grounds for an interpretation of danger. The mere existence of an alternative mode of being, the presence of which exemplifies that different identities are possible and thus de-naturalizes the claim of a particular identity to be *the* true identity, is sometimes enough to produce the understanding of a threat. (3)

An illustration of the role of interpretation in the articulation of risk is discernable in the inclusion of Bruce Banner on the team, despite his obvious and self-recognized security risk: “I focused on helping other people. I was good, until you dragged me back into this freak show and put everyone here at risk!” (*The Avengers* 2012). Bruce Banner is not, however, interpreted as a threat to American identity (in this particular film) despite his demonstrated ability to demolish entire cities (*The Incredible Hulk* 2008), however the visit by an ‘unknown alien other’ who *may* become a threat is considered a danger to national security that warrants extensive *pre-emptive* security measures. Indeed, the fuzzy zone of whom is deemed a security threat at any given time, and who is the “terrorist” is referenced within the film’s dialogue several times:

Natasha Romanoff: [All arguing in the lab] Are you really that dense?
S.H.I.E.L.D. monitors potential threats.

Bruce Banner: Captain America is on threat watch?

Natasha Romanoff: We all are.

World Security Council: I don't think you understand what you've started. Letting the Avengers loose on this world. They're dangerous. (*The Avengers* 2012)

This ability to shift interpretations of threat at any given time reflect recent tendencies of the US to replace one enemy with another and reveals the discursive power of those in positions of influence to determine who and what get constituted as a threat. It is not necessarily of import *who* or *what* is articulated as a threat, but rather the constant articulation of a threat that is an essential part of the performativity and disciplinary practice of a state's identity. It is this perpetual state of danger, Campbell explains, that is a condition made necessary for the preservation of state identity constituted in relation to difference that thus relies on the impossibility of achieving security (Campbell 1992, 13).

The maintenance of freedom and liberal democracy and the representation of America as the protector of that freedom is another common theme in such films. Often the threatening outside other who threatens to dominate and control the American population is really a metaphor for fear of the loss of "liberty". As Lofflmann argues, the interchangeable "alien threat" in superhero and action movies "simply represents an enemy of freedom" (7). In *The Avengers*, Loki's character whom, as has been mentioned earlier, represents the incongruity of a terrorist threat who espouses messages of "peace" and "freedom" while creating chaos and war, simultaneously makes apparent the ambiguity and therefore maneuverability of "liberty" and the potentially pernicious link to tyranny:

Loki: I come with glad tidings, of a world made free.

Nick Fury: Free from what?

Loki: Freedom. Freedom is life's great lie. Once you accept that, in your heart...

[Loki turns to face Selvig who's standing behind him and places his spear against Selvig's heart]

Loki: You will know peace. [Loki uses his abilities to control Selvig's mind] (*The Avengers* 2012)

It is significant that in his critique of security Neocleous outlines the preeminent concept in liberalism as that of security (rather than liberty) that he demonstrates is at the center of liberal thinking. The commonly touted idea, Neocleous argues, that there is a necessary trade-off between liberty and security that requires striking the right ‘balance’ (which today typically leans much more to the side of security) is in fact an instance of political rationality that liberalism enacts as part of a “society of security.” “Security” (which includes police power, the law, the economy, etc.) becomes the dominant mode of what Foucault has labeled “government rationality” and any “techniques of security” or “security measures” are deemed essential for liberal order building (13): “...the myth of a ‘balance’ between security and liberty opens the (back) door to an acceptance of all sorts of authoritarian security measures; measures which are then justified on liberal grounds” (Neocleous, 13).

In liberal parlance then, the superhero is the Lockean Prince who both is constructed as a hyper-moral power with the prerogative to utilize techniques of security to maintain liberal order, but whom also *is* a technique of security. In Locke’s constitution of a people’s government, the protection of “life, liberty and property” must ultimately concede to the discretionary power of an Executive – “This Power to act according to discretion, for the public good, without prescription of the law, and sometimes even against it, *is* that which is called *Prerogative*” (15, Locke, *Two Treatises*, II, sections 159, 160, 164). It is the ‘good Prince’, according to Locke, whom “ ‘cannot have too much *Prerogative*’, and this is the reason prerogative has always been ‘in the hands of our wisest and best princes’, the ‘God-like Princes [with] Title to Arbitrary

Power’ and the ability to use this power to ‘secure protection’ ” (Neocleous, 21). Locke’s Prince is also simultaneously the strongest and yet cannot have too much Prerogative “precisely because prerogative has been defined as the ‘Power to do good’” (ibid.), a problematic definition that mirrors that of the superhero. Locke’s liberal sovereign state is embodied less by a tradition of ‘liberty’ and more by a “*liberal* discourse on the priority of security” (14) Neocleous explains, revealing how the reason of state identifies security as “the definitive aspect of state power”, and “treats the sovereign as *autonomous* from morality”:

...the state can engage in whatever actions it thinks is right – ‘contrary to truth, contrary to humanity, contrary to religion’ – so long as they are necessary and performed for the public good. But this is to also suggest that the state might act beyond law and the legal limits on state power so long as it does so for ‘the common good’, the ‘good of the people’ or the ‘preservation of the state’ (18).

The increasingly vigilante characteristics of contemporary superheroes in congruence with their entrenched status as “God-like Princes [with] Title to Arbitrary Power” (Neocleous 21), autonomous from morality and entrusted with the prerogative of power, inevitably triggers forewarnings of the “authoritarian, reactionary and fascist potential within the capitalist order” (9):

The lesson of the twentieth century is that the crises of liberalism, more often than not expressed as crises threatening the security of the state and the social order of capital, reveal the potential for the rehabilitation of fascism; thriving in the crises of liberalism, the fascist potential *within* liberal democracy has always been more dangerous than the fascist tendency *against* liberal democracy. (9)

The danger of liberal order making that is premised on the conflation of liberty with the production of security is that it rests on the assumption that the “Prince” knows what is best for the people. What, then, is the potential of superheroes with power unchecked in the name of security? Of S.H.I.E.L.D?

Interestingly, in the Marvel Universe, the World Security Council was imagined exactly for this reason. The Council is defined by Marvel Wiki as “an international organization whose stated aims are facilitating cooperation in international law, international security, economic development, social progress, human rights, and achievement of world peace” (Marvel).¹⁹ The Council controls S.H.I.E.L.D and is comprised of several middle-aged men and typically one woman who communicate with Fury and each other via large plasma screens from their respective locations around the globe. The Council is presented as having a distrust of superheroes and unease with the Avengers Initiative; Fury in turn is constantly found to be arguing with the council or disobeying their orders. Significantly, at the climax of the film we witness the Council launch two nuclear missiles at New York City during a Chitauri invasion – an invasion that, at this point in the film, had not claimed any human victims. The Council was willing to kill millions in the name of security, despite not a single civilian having yet been killed by the threatening alien attack. The Council here represents the good Prince with authority and the prerogative of arbitrary power: the imaginary embodiment of how security became the foundation for absolute power.

While unlike other superhero films and Hollywood blockbusters that present a “virtual reality where the moral ambiguity, uncertainty of purpose, and questionable outcomes that have accompanied the real-life military interventions of the United States in the aftermath of 9/11 do not enter the popular imagination” (Lofflmann, 7), *The*

¹⁹ Interestingly, it was the international nature of the Council and of S.H.I.E.L.D that resulted in the Pentagon halting its cooperation with Marvel Studios on the film. Phil Strub, the Defense Departments Hollywood liaison reportedly stated, “We couldn’t reconcile the unreality of this international organization and our place in it. To whom did S.H.I.E.L.D. answer? Did we work for S.H.I.E.L.D.? We hit that roadblock and decided we couldn’t do anything with the film.” (Ackerman, 2012) Further examples of the relationship between the US government and Hollywood will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Avengers, as I've already suggested, does in contrast present a more complicated picture and in doing so succeeds in illuminating certain security paradoxes. For example, in the pivotal scene in which Fury and the Avengers debate the effectiveness of military deterrence strategies, the paradox of the realist security dilemma is alluded to:

Thor: Your work with the Tesseract is what drew Loki to it... and his allies. It is a signal to the Realm that Earth is ready for a higher form of war!

Nick Fury: Higher form? You forced our hand! We had to come up with some way that we could...

Tony Stark: A nuclear deterrent? Cause that always works well...

Nick Fury: Remind me how you made your fortune, Mr. Stark. (*The Avengers* 2012)

In their attempt to harness the power of the Tesseract and build “defense” weapons, Thor explains that such actions were likened to war mongering by the Realm who perceived S.H.I.E.L.D’s “security and defense” response to Thor’s arrival on earth (a reference to *Thor*) as threatening. This scene, a clear reference to the arms race of the Cold War, also illustrates how security operates as a signifier wherein “security” in itself becomes self-referential with political and social implications. That is, as Huysmans explains, if we understand “security” as referring to a wider framework of meaning within which we understand particular ways of organizing particular forms of life (1998, 228), “security” is a signifier which has the performative function of organizing social relations into security relations (232). Security is thus the product of social processes in which security issues are socially constructed: security, then is “a self-referential practice, because it is in this practice that the issue becomes a security issue – not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as such a threat” (Buzan, Waever and de Wilde 1998, 24; Weaver 1995, 65-71). In keeping with the example of the Cold War, a period in Americas history that is epitomized by the ceaseless representation

of images and narratives of the Soviet Union as an imminent military threat, Neocleous reveals that today there is much evidence to suggest that this was in fact more of an image constructed as a part of a national security project being mapped out than part of any reality:

Thus the rise of the national security state was not dependent on any real military threat posed by the Soviet Union, which even the US national security managers correctly identified at the time as both limited and weak. 'The Soviet Union does not want war with the United States', wrote Allen Dulles in 1948. George Kennan confessed in 1956 that 'the image of Stalinist Russia poised and yearning to attack the West...was largely a creation of the Western imagination', and even the much later US *National Security Strategy* released in September 2002 admits that 'in the Cold War...we faced a generally status quo, risk-adverse adversary'. This view is confirmed by some of the official documents of the time. The 'Resume of the World Situation', 6 November 1947, put out by the Policy Planning Staff (PPS), notes that 'the danger of war is vastly exaggerated in many quarters' and that 'the Soviet Government neither wants nor expects war'. (97-98)

By discursively identifying Thor's landing on earth as a security threat, Fury and S.H.I.E.L.D constituted the existence of an (in)security condition which set in motion the organization of social relations into security relations. The discursive formation of an issue, event, or moment into a security story has implications, such as the launching of an arms race, as alluded to in *The Avengers*, as a result of misunderstandings and miscommunication between culturally disparate nations, groups, and individuals.

The circumstances of the Chitauri invasion and the resulting consequences (or lack thereof) are a prime example of a related recurring security theme in superhero and more broadly, many Hollywood action/disaster films: the protagonist (typically the US) is almost always acting in defense which thus almost always justifies a "hard power" (militarized) response, that has no discernable negative effects other than succeeding in destroying the enemy. Lofflman demonstrates how these unrealistic depictions are fairly typical in "Alien-invasion theme" films: "...the United States is always seen as acting in

defense, its military power only mobilized in response to external threat: the superpower as defender, liberator, and protector” (8). The innocent/defender/victim narrative serves to deny the history of America’s imperial wars overseas and role as an occupying force and serves to re-inscribe the hegemonic discourse of national security touted by the Department of Defense. Although speaking specifically here of Hollywood films in receipt of Pentagon funding, Lofflman’s statement reflects the typical narrative of Marvel films:

This classic narrative of David versus Goliath allows the audience to easily identify with the American ‘citizen-soldier,’ who defends the homeland with ingenuity and courage against the crushing superiority of the enemy’s war machine. At the same time, this cinematic imagination that the Pentagon promotes through the films it supports, conveniently avoids a critical engagement with the reality of American military power as occupying force in the post-9/11 environment. (10)

That “security” is utilized as a strategy to justify war and imperial/neocolonial motives is further made invisible by the defense narrative and representations of the United States as an “innocent victim of unprovoked outside aggression” (12) in popular cinematic productions.

Although often there is the depiction of an attempt by the fighting parties to mediate using soft-power diplomacy (as in Thor’s fleeting effort to persuade Loki to “give up the Tesseract! Give up this poisonous dream! You come home!” (*The Avengers* 2012), such attempts are always in vain and the villain incapable of being reasoned with. Moreover, in these “sanitized version[s] of warfare and military heroism” the costs of the war are always invisible: “...post-traumatic stress, civilian casualties, mutilation, or friendly fire incidents are largely absent from the scenario of war fighting” (Lofflman 9). This is certainly the case in *The Avengers* when in the final battle scene the team fights

the invasion led by Loki of the technologically advanced reptilian humanoids, the Chitauri, and their mothership the Leviathan (“large airborne troop carriers that resemble biomechanical arthropods or limbless reptiles, encased in mechanized armor” (Chitauri) in a battle that quite spectacularly demolishes Manhattan, yet remarkably sustains no visible casualties.²⁰ The dream of a war with no civilian casualties plays a role in driving the research and development of technologically advanced armor and weaponry and is a delusion (as argued in Chapter 5) that persists in reality.

Fury’s snide remark in the conversation with Stark quoted above regarding Stark’s exorbitant wealth as a result of his role in the research and development of military weapons alludes to the mutually symbiotic relationship between the capitalist state and the state as a security apparatus, a theme that is dominant in the earlier *Iron Man* films (*Iron Man* 2008, *Iron Man 2* 2010, and *Iron Man 3* 2013) and an essential part of the “genius, billionaire, playboy” identity of Tony Stark. Iron Man is ultimately a “capitalist security technique” whose heroic status depends on the capitalist system.²¹ The discourse around security and capital is presented simply as the natural function of a pre-existing and natural security state. “For as much as security has become a strategy for the expansion of capital” Neocleous explains, so conversely capital shores up the ideology of security and facilitates its flows. And in so doing it shores up rather than

²⁰ Interestingly, in the next installment of Marvels’ Iron Man series, *Iron Man 3*, Tony Stark’s character is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder after the events in New York City in *The Avengers*, including repeated anxiety attacks, sleeplessness, and depression. Stark’s version of PTSD, however, sees him obsessively build the most technologically advanced Iron Man suit to date, the modular Mark 42, hardly a realistic representation of post-war suffering.

²¹ Similar arguments have been made previously of contemporary portrayals of superheroes, for instance Toh reveals how the recent Batman films “promote a matrix of consumer desire, military fetish and an ultimate reliance on force” (Toh 2009, 1)

challenges the logic of state power” (159).²² The spectacular displays of military hardware, in particular the mobile headquarters of S.H.I.E.L.D, the Helicarrier (an “awe-inspiring, tilt-rotor aircraft carrier” holding the US military’s latest stealth fighters (Ackerman, 2012)), large numbers of security personnel, futuristic weapons, and technology all indicate an incredible investment of capital in security, an industry that is thusly undoubtedly and unapologetically flaunted in all the Marvel movies:

...the security industry both feeds on and feeds the very ideology propagated by the security state (and, of course, a security-obsessed mass media and intelligentsia). The security industry is thereby integral to an imagined economy of insecurity...Security has thus become a strategy for the expansion of capital...this *reinforces* the logic of security around which the state is organized and helps put certain state capacities in motion, elaborating and constantly multiplying apparatuses of coercion, control and political administration...For as much as security has become a strategy for the expansion of capital, so conversely capital shores up the ideology of security and facilitates its flows. And in so doing it shores up rather than challenges the logic of state power. (Neocleous 159)

The protection and expansion of capital and capital investment in military superiority is indistinguishable from the liberal project of security and is embedded within Superhero narratives.

Finally, in the concluding scenes of the film the tone is “not an air of triumph, but rather one of wariness of what might attack next”, signaling a “paradigm shift that points not toward ensured security, but toward more uncertainty” (Hagley and Harrison, 123). Nick Fury is then questioned by members of the S.H.I.E.L.D council, who ask why the team would return to their aid in future potential threats to which Fury responds, “Because we will need them to,” implying the certainty of unknown future attacks. Such an expression of the inevitability and permanent state of insecurity evokes establishment

²² “Economic security”, argues Neocleous, was in fact the discourse that was utilized to maintain the capitalist socio-economic order when faced with the “communist threat” (98).

narratives²³ that both assume and justify a permanent state of exception in which the Avengers Initiative is pre-authorized to act and a belief that social and political problems can be resolved via our hero/security. This ultimately legitimizes the status quo including our current institutions, organizations and practices, relies on the assumption that Western political identities are unproblematic and universally desirable, and makes unthinkable the solutions that lie outside the current political, economic, and social order.

Imagining Beyond the Metanarrative of (In) Security

Steve Rodgers: "This doesn't have to end in a fight, Buck".

Bucky: "It always ends in a fight". (Captain America: Civil War (2016))

The "security story" presented in contemporary superhero movies often mirrors the "security story" articulated by security professionals (or "security Fuckers" as James Kellman articulates (Neocleous, 5), but also at times subverts it in ways that bring our attention to the very problematic logics upon which they rely. The entanglements I have attempted to demonstrate above between superheroes and security exposes: 1) the importance of paying attention to the way traditional "security" tropes that rely on violence get deployed in pop culture, 2) our incoherence regarding the changing world and our inability to understand or act meaningfully within it while clinging to outdated models of security that rely on militarism, 3) the importance of being critical of who or what gets deemed heroic and becoming attuned to why and how (and by whom) the hero mythology gets deployed, and 4) the need to abandon security discourse and think outside of the metanarrative of (in)security.

²³ Establishment narratives are defined by DiPaolo as one category of politically themed superhero adventures in which "the superhero acts to preserve the social status quo, and protects the government and the populace from invading foreign hordes, enemy saboteurs, and homegrown criminals and terrorists" (2011, 12). This is contrasted with anti-establishment and colonial themes.

By engaging with popular culture narratives and being critical of representations of security discourses and practices, it allows us to make a deeper critique of the modalities and the consequences of security and militarization. The immense popularity of superhero films points to an extremely important medium through which insecurity and its accompanying discourses of danger and the construction of fear through a subjective “other” gets constantly reiterated. Heroic discourses are used in and become part of the enactment of security and thus demonstrate the ways in which security is made intelligible, enacted and appropriated. Regimes of security involve power relationships that reproduce insecurity while obscuring those embedded relations of power that render particular people and environments insecure; through representations of the “hero” we become disciplined to desire certain things like security while questions of who defines what the threats are is made invisible or unimportant. For example, both superheroes and security narratives rely on particular constructed ideas of morality that are tied to militarism, patriotism, warrior mythos, and violent masculinity. These myths have become so entrenched as reality that they have become hyper-moral, unquestionable, and immune to ideological negotiation. In turn the move to make superheroes increasingly like soldiers (discussed in Chapters 4 and 5) functions to make the work of soldiers look meaningful, glorious, and noble. They also simultaneously obscure other pressing problems that cannot be solved via violence or the military. Consider, for instance, the danger of existing political practices that follow from the prevailing aesthetic of media representation which, as Bleiker illustrates, favours “heroic and spectacular images of wars and terrorist attacks over mundane daily problems,” largely as a result of the “market-dependent” and “entertainment-oriented” nature of television and media

networks. Such representations are the norm even if, exclaims Bleiker, “the human, social, and economic impact of the latter is far more devastating and consequential in nature” (517). Such an analysis, then, allows us to see the way heroic narrative conventions are used to maintain the status quo and reproduce existing power relationships. This, explains Neocleous, is an inescapable feature of the security state: “To the extent that capital and the state live off the production of insecurity, they must also ensure that security is never really achieved. The constant iteration of insecurity after insecurity ensures that everyone is forced to keep striving for some form of security” (156). The deluge of superhero movies that are almost uniformly comprised of the (in)security narratives discussed above ensures their constant reiteration in our popular imagination (or as Muller articulates “Vulnerability is everywhere – securitize everything” (213)). Ultimately then, what an unpacking of these narratives does for us is to better allow us to see how they are part of the processes of power which are embedded in both the pop culture and political arenas, and the potential alternatives that such power functions to keep invisible.

In their introduction to a special issue of *Security Dialogue* on ‘Securitization, Militarization and Visual Culture in the Worlds of Post-9/11’, Campbell and Shapiro explain how visual culture is simultaneously implicated in sustaining security practices and enabling critical practices that contest them (133):

...given the increasing inter-articulation between the forces shaping securitization and militarization and those resident in visual culture, this is a new contested terrain of the image broadly understood as a social relation, with some aspects of visual culture aiding and abetting securitization and militarization and some serving as a domain of critical practice and counter-memory for the issues, perspectives and people occluded by securitization and militarization. (132-133)

While the heroes in *The Avengers* are initially portrayed as reluctant participants in their mission, highly skeptical of S.H.I.E.L.D, and explicitly adverse to the idea of weapons of mass destruction and surveillance practices, *The Avengers* is ultimately premised upon the “the Avengers Initiative”. This is at its heart a security strategy which is founded on the meta-narrative of security and exhibits typical Hollywood superhero/(in)security discourses of militarism, exceptionalism, colonialism, hypermasculinity, and ‘legitimate’ violence. Moreover, the comic-book style aesthetic of the cartoonish battle scenes as well as the “invincibility” of the superhero imagined body occludes the graphic and gruesome realities of the human costs of war which ultimately, as Campbell and Shapiro point to in the passage above, maintains the invisibility of the social relations of power which are embedded in practices of securitization and militarization. Such typical Hollywood imaginings correspond to the “derealization” of the horror of war that Zizek describes having occurred in the post 9/11 visual reporting which never revealed blood, dismembered bodies, or the dying in stylistic opposition to coverage quite typical of Third World media reporting, distancing the realities of war between “Us” vs. “Them” (See Zizek p.13)

The Avengers, like many other superhero films and comics, disaster narratives, alien-invasion films, and post-apocalyptic themed films released in the post 9-11 era, is premised on the metanarrative of security and relies on aspects of the normative security discourses of fear, exceptionalism, responsibility, legitimate violence, and deterrence. With the imaginary of security/insecurity everywhere, the belief that vulnerability to the unknown is our greatest weakness reinforces security measures as necessary and rationalizes the securitizing of public space. Contemporary superhero movies such as *The*

Avengers, through the ambivalent and hyper-moral characters and the contradictions and paradoxes made visible by exposing moments of transgression, critique, irony, and even humour, make the assumptions underlying security paradigms and thus present a space for valuable critique of the axiomatic dimensions of security.

Engaging with superhero mythology and its popular contemporary form contributes to revealing the analogous construction of the problem of “security” and “insecurity” and can thus make a contribution in critiquing the central problematic of security: that of its foundationalist assumptions and the power structures embedded within. By unpacking our acceptance of morally ambiguous heroes and the constructed dichotomy between their identity and actions and those of the villainous other, we can begin to understand how both heroism and security discourse become entrenched and normalized and can discipline us to desire certain things (like security) and justify particular actions in the name of security. Embedded within these security narratives is an obvious and overarching yet unheeded proclivity towards militarism. In the next Chapter I consider several aspects of superhero films from visual imagery to ties to historical events and financial partnerships that suggest the profound importance of understanding the political connections between militarism and popular culture.

Chapter Four - The Militarization of our Contemporary Heroes

...many people can become militarized in their thinking, in how they live their daily lives, in what they aspire to for their children or their society, without ever wielding a rifle or donning a helmet. (Enloe 2000, 2)

From Kosovo to Afghanistan violence remains the modus operandi of world politics. (Bleiker 2001, 510)

A serious interrogation of the politics of superheroes reveals not only that they represent current ideologies, theories and practices of world politics and the discipline of IR, more importantly, as we have seen in the previous chapter and will be further examined throughout this dissertation, superheroes can expose the shortcomings and paradoxes prevalent in world politics: the whitewashing of death or permanent injury from war and violence and the glorification of violent hypermasculine “heroes” in societies where economic, political, and social disregard for veterans is omnipresent; malleable but ultimately violent masculinities; an almost religious belief in the superiority of advancements in military technology improving odds in military battle despite evidence to the contrary, and; a paradoxical (mis)understanding of (in)security. The construction of these matters in both superhero films and in political practice, mainstream political ideology, and the discipline of IR is made ever more prescient in the face of collusion between Hollywood, the government and the military and an everyday discursive/visual militarization.

The creators of superhero films are always entangled within networks of power, driven by social mores, and conditioned by social, cultural, economic and historical practices through which popular culture artefacts are ultimately produced and make sense to us. This chapter shifts our focus to some of the practices of production and histories of militarized entanglements to consider how they are vital to the ability of popular mainstream Hollywood superhero films to reproduce and shape our attitudes, beliefs and

understandings of militaries, war, and violence. It turns our attention towards the less visible and under-studied practices that are enmeshed in war and that are involved in various attempts to maintain and perform militarized masculinities and attempts to make visible the (sometimes enjoyable) work that is required to sustain particular subjectivities and violent activities. In *War as Experience*, Christine Sylvester stresses that in studying the processes of war-making we should consider the full scope of political, social, cultural, ideological and economic entanglements through which they operate:

In the case of war, the institutional components include: heroic myths and stories about battles for freedom and tragic losses; memories of war passed from generation to generation; the workings of defense departments and militaries; the production of war-accepting or -glorifying masculinities; the steady production and development of weapon systems; religions that continue to weigh issues of just and unjust wars instead of advocating no wars; and aspects of global popular culture – films, video games, TV shows, advertisements, pop songs, and fashion design – that tacitly support activities of violent politics by mimicking or modeling their elements in everyday circumstances. (Sylvester 2013, 4)

The recognition of the need for studying war this way is indebted to the work of those such as feminist IR scholar Cynthia Enloe who recognized militarization as a sociopolitical process by which militarism as an ideology is “driven deep down into the soil of a society” (Enloe 2004, 220); a “contradictory and tense social process in which civil society organizes itself for the production of violence” (Geyer 1989, 79) and simultaneously “a discursive process, involving a shift in general societal beliefs and values in ways necessary to legitimate the use of force, the organization of large standing armies and their leaders and the higher taxes or tribute used to pay them” (Lutz 2002, 723). In the previous chapter, for instance, we saw how militarization under the guise of “security” often gets framed as a tool to defend freedom: “The price of freedom is high. And it’s a price I’m willing pay” (Captain America in *Captain America: The Winter*

Soldier 2014). This analysis follows from such insights but also acknowledges that “our very conceptions of military power, militarism, and militarization are themselves open to critique and reimagining” (Basham et al. 2015, 1). Thus, approaching military power as a question rather than taking it for granted and being curious about its character, its applications and effects, how it gets represented, the way it circulates (Basham et al. 2015, 1-2) as well as considering what the enjoyment is that is gained from participation in militarism enables avenues of inquiry that includes engagement with cultural artifacts.

In the previous chapter the ability of the contemporary Hollywood superhero to reflect, project, and subvert security discourses was explored. In this chapter I’m enquiring into what kind of militarisms superhero characters and narratives engender and whether they might be an important resource for understanding the cyclical and complex processes of militarization. I am investigating the structures embedded within the film and war industries that sanction their affiliation and empower the proliferation of particular ways of thinking about war and the military. Further, I am considering what such work, from the disciplinary origin of IR, critical feminist security studies, and critical military studies, might contribute to our understanding of the historic and contemporary popularity of superheroes and the processes involved in their militarization.

Enjoying and Ignoring War

Entanglements between popular culture and military culture are evident in even the most mundane and invisible aspects of the everyday: video gaming, automotive design, clothing, food, sports analogies and plays, advertising, popular discourse, and children’s toys are just some of the many areas that have been widely studied as aspects

of daily life that are impacted by militarization and feed into its (re)production and dissemination. Militarism is understood as encompassing the beliefs, values, and assumptions that comprise the effectiveness of armed force to resolve tensions, the naturalness of hierarchy, the need for a state to have a military in order to be perceived as legitimate, and a normative militarized masculinity. It is often framed as a necessary tool in defending freedom and democracy despite the tendency to effectively “remove contentious and contested areas of social life from democratic and political engagement” (Davies and Philpott 2013, 42). The process of militarization involves cultural, institutional, ideological, and economic transformations through which militaristic needs, presumptions, and ideas gradually come to influence or determine a person or thing (Enloe 2000, 2-4). That this is a linear, easily traceable process is however a misnomer: the histories and genealogies of civil-military entanglement are indicative of militarism as a constant cyclical process that is performed and reproduced in multiple ways. Thus, there is a crucial role for images and discourses as vehicles for the transmission of ideas that legitimize militaries, sanitize war and violence, reinforce binaries of masculinity and femininity and “good” and “evil”, and reinforce national identities. These discourses of militarism are embedded in both public and private spheres through which they get entrenched, legitimized, and extended (Davies, Philpott 2013, 46). Militarization, Enloe explains, “creeps into ordinary daily routines; it threads its way amid memos, laundry, lovemaking, and the clinking of frosted beer glasses” and involves “cultural, as well as institutional, ideological, and economic transformations” (2000, 3).

Popular culture, explain Davies and Philpott, is then both constituted as an object for militarization and a space in which subjectivities are shaped and formed whereby

militarization can “penetrate and subordinate” the public sphere (2013, 42).

Simultaneously, this colonization of the public sphere is resulting in decreasing space within popular culture for “acceptable” critique of the military. Our daily routines in the contemporary American-centric, Anglophone sphere are embedded within a visually dominant society in which every aspect of our daily lives - (mis)information, leisure, labour – are produced, consumed and understood through a visual language. Militarism is similarly embedded within this visual language: “Visual images are at the forefront of the ways in which military violence is remembered, memorialized, consumed, and inscribed with meaning” (Basham et al., 2015). The political power of the visibility of militarism is evident in the superfluous war images that circulate in the media wherein, as Kaplan explains, “the public are well aware that images can be fictionalized”, and yet “photographs and satellite imagery are still often treated by media outlets as if they hold some kind of truth” (Basham et al. 2015, 2).

The linkages between the everyday, the media industry, and government has been coined by Der Derian as the military-industrial-media-entertainment network, or MIME-NET, which, as Davies and Philpott argue is a particularly cogent understanding of the profound importance of the scope of these entanglements, involving:

a media savvy military, information-sensitive and controlling government administrations in the form of Hollywood, a compliant entertainment industry that showed it was willing to collaborate and cooperate in the production of a political atmosphere that would sustain long term warfare, a corporate media willingly lending its support to military adventurism and new media forms such as electronic games with as yet poorly understood affective potential but highly responsive to the political environment... (Davies and Philpott 2013, 49)

Similarly, Roger Stahl uses the term “Militainment” to define the interaction between civil and military spheres which has in the past decades transitioned towards an interactive consumer war in which the “citizen spectator” has become the “virtual citizen-

soldier.” This is an important distinction in reference to the integration of entertainment and war: Stahl interrogates, for example: the relationship between reality television and the military; new ground for integrative war play offered by video gaming platforms which includes the use of commercial games for military training; the release of training simulators by the military for public consumption, and; the amalgamation of pleasure and death in extreme sports. The deliberate targeting of the young consumer is particularly concerning here, visible in the marketing of “war-play” through children’s toys and cartoons, including a US army line of action figures, and the production of video games for army recruitment. The civil-military relationship, Stahl notes, has always been a “political fulcrum”, but it is of particular importance to acknowledge the construction of citizen subjectivities as crucial for understanding how discourse can function within circuits of power that manufacture war itself (Stahl 2009, 4; Kaplan 2006).

The study of the relationship between film and militarization within political science and IR has primarily been taken up in one of two forms. On the one hand, following recent currents in popular culture and IR, many readings of films take an “allegorical or mimetic view of the popular culture-world politics nexus” which “see (popular) culture as merely reflecting the self-evident dynamics of world politics” (Grayson, 1; See Carpenter 2012; Hall 2011). As Grayson explains, such limited mimetic readings are problematic insofar as they rely on assumptions about what politics is (and is not), and popular culture’s relationship to it. An alternative approach turns its attention to the way in which the symbiotic relationship between the culture industry (Hollywood) and the US government produces a militarized discourse that perpetuates a culture of militarism (Boggs and Pollard 2007; Robb 2004). Such a focus is also not without its

difficulties, namely that it assumes particular effects on the audience, social consciousness and political ideology (Davies and Philpott 2013). Both types of approaches and the politics they produce are useful for an interrogation of the relationship between superheroes and militarization but each alone is limited.

Building upon the insights of these bodies of work but also taking into consideration relatively recent shifts in the sound, digital, and special effects arenas of the film industry, this analysis also considers the way in which militarism is felt and performed; militarism is not just cognitive but is a sensory and affective experience and one that continues to be performed in various ways. Such an approach brings into focus an aspect of enjoyment that is gained from such feelings and performances and begins to unravel the cyclical nature of militarism – that militarism is a constant cyclical process rather than a linear process and one that can be divided into civil and military spheres. Further, such an analysis also reveals how the creators of superhero films incorporate elements of humour, irony, and self-reference into our experience that might function as subtle transgression or overt critique of militarism. Additionally, by incorporating an analysis of the historical significance of comic books superheroes of the past (See Coogan 2006; Detora 2009; Wright 2000) it is possible to gain insight into what our contemporary icons in Hollywood films can tell us about our present by interrogating what they potentially represent politically, ideologically, and emotionally.

Superheroes at War

Young Allies are you ready to do your duty for America and Civilization? – Bucky (Young Allies #1 1941; Weiner 88)

Popular culture icons and war have a long historical relationship. During World War Two (WWII), artists, writers, and producers of comic books, cartoons, and television

shows found themselves at war; storylines reflected this reality and characters became symbolically and rhetorically ambassadors for the political and military goals of the US. Captain America, for instance, was quite overtly tied to the American war campaign: aside from outright displays of patriotism made evident by the American flag emblazoned on his chest, the hero was deliberately recruited in comic book narratives to fight Hitler and the Nazis. During the Cold War, many superhero characters were enlisted in the war effort and these battles raged not just in comic books but also in television shows, posters, and collectibles. In fact, since their incarnation in comics, superheroes have had a very intimate relationship with politics, war and the military. Superheroes were often made into “the mascots of the war effort” (Knowles 2007, 4); their patriotism, moral superiority over the enemy and militaristic characteristics which was mostly exhibited in the most popular characters (Captain America, Captain Marvel, Superman), represented and perpetuated the dominant war discourse of the time. This nostalgically labeled “Golden Age of Comics” saw the birth of the patriotic saviour hero, a nationalistic icon who would fight for good (or more specifically, the “good American way”) during a time of social strife and perceived insecurity. As Krensky exclaims, this was not accidental: “By the end of the 1930s, the United States was in need of heroes”; while the hardships of the Great Depression were easing, increases in crime, the threat of Fascism, and the formation of the Axis powers which would ultimately give rise to WWII made people feel insecure: “The idea of Superman making the world a better place gave people a sense of hope for the future” (Krensky 2008 23; 19-20). During the war, patriotic saviours began fighting the Nazis because, “While Americans worried about who would win the battle overseas, readers knew there was no contest about who would win the comic book

fighters” (Krensky 2008, 28); Captain Marvel, the Sub-Mariner, the Human Torch, and even Batman were recruited in the comics to fight the war effort.²⁴ In 1941, Captain America joined the fight, and his origins, costume, and military training made him the ideal representation for the desired patriotic citizen and America’s war.

During the Depression in the US, the superhero became a “historical necessity”: the growing popularity of heroes with supernormal powers who could fight off the crime and the disillusionment of the Depression while simultaneously battling the dictators in Europe illustrated the desire for “comforting fantasies of powerful, decisive men who could set things right” (Knowles 2007, 77). Superhero narratives and characters were particularly suited to the political myths of WWII and the Cold War era: the simplistic moral oppositions of good vs. bad is a mainstay of superhero mythology and such a discourse fit nicely with the wartime political agenda, concealing and even celebrating constructed notions of who was ‘good’ (American troops) and who was ‘inferior’ (the enemy) as natural. The aesthetic of comic books was not that dissimilar from propaganda posters, and thus war-time ideology seemed to slip seamlessly in and out of political advertisements and superhero characters: “Even a brief look at superhero comics from the 1940s,” explains Murray “leaves little doubt that the genre as a whole fed off the American government’s program of domestic propaganda” (2000, 142).

WWII was marked by the convergence of the comic book industry (publishers, creators, readers) with government policy and political mythologies. As Bradford W. Wright’s (2001) anthology of the history of comics in America reveals, this was largely

²⁴ The covers and stories of comics during this period often crossed over into direct advertising for the war effort. Often Americans were urged to buy U.S. government war bonds and stamps to raise money for the military effort. The cover art of an issue of *World’s Finest Comics* for example displays Superman, Batman and Robin accompanied by the slogan “Sink the Japanzis with Bonds & Stamps” (Krensky 2008, 29).

represented by patriotic zeal coupled with prejudiced, intolerant, racist and hate-filled sentiment that articulated war as about revenge and ‘beating an evil enemy’ (54-55). The service personnel serving overseas during WWII and the Cold War made up a huge part of comic book readership, perhaps in part because their favorite illustrated heroes were fighting the very same enemies that they were. During the war, explains Knowles (2007), comic book circulation reached the millions and essentially became indispensable leisure material for GI’s stationed away from home. The heroes flaunted the US political agenda and fought real life enemies of the US government. Hitler was a popular enemy for American superheroes even before the US entered the war: according to Weiner overtly patriotic comics such as *Military Comics*, *United States Marines*, *All American Comics*, and *USA Comics* flooded the market during this time, as did army comics including *Our Army at War*, *All-American Men of War*, *Our Fighting Forces*, and *Star Spangled War Stories*. Notably, there were numerous “kid-gang comics” which often featured child heroes fighting Axis enemies such as The Boy Commandos (Weiner 2008, 84) while economically supporting the war efforts:

Comic readers in the Golden Age knew who the enemy was, as DC Comics’ Superman, Batman, and Robin promoted War Bonds, battled the Axis powers, and instructed kids how to conserve material goods to help soldiers overseas. Fawcett Publications’ Captain Marvel battled Captain Nazi, and Timely (Marvel) publications added dime for dime money that fans contributed to the War Department. (Ibid. 85)

In fact, the very first issue of Captain America Comics included an advertisement calling on readers to join a club called the “Sentinels of Liberty” to fight alongside Captain America in his “wars against spies in the U.S.A” (Ibid. 86).

Captain America is perhaps the most recognized fictional super-patriot, his civilian alter ego Steve Rogers was an army private, and as a superhero he was draped

in the American flag and was depicted as fighting a real rather than fictional enemy during this period. The image of Captain America on the first cover of Captain America Comics delivering a forceful punch to Hitler's jaw, secured the possibility for children's mythical heroes to serve as patriotic warriors who would help America defeat its enemies. A scientifically enhanced version of the average soldier, Captain America was at his essence an idealized depiction of the U.S. soldier and driven by the same patriotic zeal: "The propaganda sold the very message that the idealistic reading audience wanted to buy – American soldiers were the best in the world, and each of them would submit himself to whatever the government could cook up to secure victory" (Zimmerman 2004, 87). However, the number of other patriotic superheroes who "went to war" was extensive and included children's favorites such as Miss America, the Shield, the Guardian, the Star-Spangled Kid, the Patriot, and teams such as The Young Allies, Justice Society of America, and Liberty Legion (Weiner 2008, 85). Two well-known superheroes who are still popular in comics today, the Human Torch and the Sub-Mariner, are historically enemies who fought each other in the comic book narratives, but actually team up to fight the Nazis in 1941 (Ibid., 86-87).

The heroic trope necessitates something or someone who presents a danger to the status quo, and in the world of superheroes, this has typically meant that the 'bad guy' was a stereotypical caricature of an ethnic representation, and wartime comics in particular served up white heroes fighting against the racialized other:

Wartime comics drew Asian characters as villains hell-bent on world domination. No differentiation was made between Japanese (in league with the Axis powers) and Chinese (victims of Japanese aggression) or Southeast Asians (protectorates of Western powers). Their physical features were stereotyped, caricatured and exaggerated to a frightening level, suggesting simply by appearance that they were at once dangerous and ridiculous. (Zimmerman 2004, 74)

During the Cold War, readers continued to read about their favorite heroes participating in the war and promoting patriotic sentiments, but the subject often revolved around atomic power and communist enemies. Captain America became a “Commie Smasher,” radiation poisoning became the new plot of choice for origin stories, and superheroes continued to function as “the world’s saviors, defending freedom and democracy” while demonizing and stereotyping fictional and actual enemies (Ibid, 97). Even after the war, the heroic white heroes were often up against “simple savages” from Africa, mystical, pagan Indians, and “suspicious Asians”, all in need of “strong, white leadership,” and when Marvel Comics began to introduce ethnic superheroes in the 1960s and 70s, they remained stereotypical representations (for example, the Black Panther, Luke Cage, Thunderhawk, and Shang-Chi) (Ibid., 75-76). Since the 1970s superheroes in general tackled social justice and inequality issues as comics in general embraced a “mainstream, liberal worldview of tolerance and progressive libertarian ideals” (Zimmerman 2004, 14), nonetheless, the majority culture of white male heroes remains in comic books, and has remained dominant in Hollywood (69).

Today, the ties between superhero characters and war-making persists but manifests differently in three significant ways: first, while new characters are constantly being created, some of the most popular and widely read characters are existing characters that have been reinvented many times over since their original creation and different illustrators and writers have brought to life the same characters in very different ways. Thus, characters are not stagnant and the ways in which they are militarized and incorporate violence, reflect justice, racism, sexism, war, and reference to real events depends on the writers, illustrators, publishers and readership at a particular place and

time. Second, the most popular mode for dissemination of the genre has shifted from comic books to film, and within this medium there have been rapid developments in sound, digital and special effects, viewing space and technology, and the size and quality of home entertainment devices which augments and immerses the viewer in the superhero world. These developments necessitate further inquiry into how shifts in technology effect the production aesthetic and ultimately the audience experience and affect. Third, the consolidation of the industry into the Marvel Universe and the DC Universe has had a significant impact on the way audiences can engage with their heroes. The Marvel Entertainment industry, for example, had created a successful formula to ensure the longevity of each superhero “brand”: typically a superhero is introduced in their own feature film (constructed so as to be accessible to those who are unfamiliar with the character but also incorporating references or subtle nods to their comic origin in a well-known tactic to appease the “fan-boys”) which typically “conclude” (they never end) with teasers that hook audience members into anticipation of the next film. More uniquely, Marvel will then bring individual superheroes together into other films, as in for example *The Avengers* (2012) discussed in the previous chapter, with its own teasers for additional sequels, thus successfully extending the lifespan of a character and the sub-genre in particular. This formula draws the viewer into a lengthy, possibly never-ending, engagement with the superhero character, narrative and (hyper-moral) universe of militarized justice.

A History of Hollywood Militarism

“How do we know the good guys from the bad guys?” – Falcon

“If they’re shooting at you, they’re bad.” – Captain America (Captain America: The Winter Soldier 2014)

The relationship between Hollywood and militarism is almost as old as cinema itself. As early as the period immediately prior to the First World War moving images began to be used for propaganda purposes, declares Susan Carruthers (2000, 68), although not always explicitly so. From *Birth of a Nation* (1915), through *Patton* (1970) Lawrence H. Suid explains, Hollywood films enticed audiences with images of heroic soldiers, of “the American fighting man as brave, determined, and successful.” D.W. Griffith's 1915 film, *The Birth of a Nation* "...inflamed the already narrow-minded, prejudiced, puritanical white-American masses against the Negroes and thus retarded by at least half a century the progress of white-Negro relations in the United States" (2002, 10). During the two world wars motion pictures were recognized as weapons, which could stimulate national will, garner support for intervention, and even contribute financially to the war economy. Indeed, some scholars have argued that Hollywood was the largest war profiteer of the First World War, when film stars helped to both sell and finance the war while simultaneously securing Hollywood's domination over the world movie market and establishing the industry as a patriotic institution (Carruthers 2000, 72-3). Films were produced targeting specific audiences in deliberate ways to most effectively convey wartime messages of propaganda that would influence opinions of the enemy and create and maintain support for military violence against them. Consider, for example, *Our Enemy the Japanese*, a US Navy training film produced by the US Government Office of War Information Bureau of Motion Pictures in 1943 specifically to “educate” Navy servicemen about their enemy, informing the audience that “Their weapons are modern, their thinking 2000 years out of date” (1943).

Cartoons, like comic book characters seemed to be an especially effective medium that allowed the drawings of characters to aesthetically embody embellished and distorted character traits that depicted the enemies as evil, ugly, ignorant, obese, and literally as animals considered dangerous, lazy, or predatory and the soldier, civilian, or allies as cute, endearing but disciplined. *Wartime Donald* (1942-1944) was a series comprised of many cartoons including *Der Fuehrer's Face*, *Fall out Fall in*, *The Old Army Game*, *Sky Trooper*, *Home Defense* and *Commando Duck* and is just one set of examples of the use of familiar cartoon characters to propagate a particular perception of the validity of the war and of the "enemy." In *Donald gets Drafted* (1942), a chorus refrain repeats cheerfully in the opening montage, "The army's not the army anymore, it's better than it's ever been before! You used to walk a mile for beans, but now they bring'em to ya, and all the Generals say hello! As though they really knew ya!" as Donald cheerfully gets drafted to fight in the war and then ends up in KP duty due to his lack of discipline in boot camp. *Education for Death - The Making of the Nazi*, a short film produced by Walt Disney in 1943 about the Nazi indoctrination of youth under Hitler's regime, or the series of *Mr. Hook* propaganda cartoons specifically produced as training films for the US Navy in 1945, while not explicitly government-issued war propaganda, are clear in their message of needing to prepare and support a war in order to fight a particularly evil and savage enemy.

Indeed, during the two World Wars motion pictures were recognized as weapons, explain O'Connor and Rollins, which could stimulate national will, garner support for intervention, and even contribute financially to the war economy. *Out of the Frying Pan, into the Firing Line* (1942) a propaganda film that insists "Meat drippings sink Axis

warships!” for instance, uses the adorable and endearing Disney characters of Pluto the Dog and Minnie Mouse to encourage the contribution of household labour for the war effort. *The Ducktators* (1942), a Looney Tunes barnyard analogy of WWII, essentially a propaganda cartoon produced by Warner Brothers which, ends with disturbingly violent victory (including the heads of the enemy mounted on the “Peace Dove’s” wall) implores the audience: “For victory, buy United States savings bonds and stamps”. The government exercised its ability to influence national opinion by controlling the content and exhibition of films, providing guidelines to studios and monitoring scripts (O’Connor and Rollins 2008, 30-31).

The Re-incarnated Superhero Goes to the Movies

The current mutually exploitative relationship between Hollywood and the military is thus not new, nor is it undocumented. Robb (2004) reveals how Hollywood producers and directors today receive access to billions of dollars’ worth of military equipment, but at the cost of intellectual freedom—in exchange the military is able to manipulate its own image in what has become one of the most powerful industries in popular culture: “It’s a devil’s bargain that’s a good deal for both sides,” Robb explains, “And the only thing Hollywood likes more than movies is a good deal” (2004, 13 and 25). The goal of enhancing military recruitment and retrenchment is the primary reason the military offers its assistance to filmmakers, a fact that in and of itself requires that we pay attention to the way in which the military gets portrayed in film. As we have already analysed in Chapter 1, heroism is an extremely important aspect of this desired image, and a heroic rendering of individual soldiers or the US military overall has played a determining role in the changes requested to scripts and thus the ultimate product.

Discussing the process of acquiring military assistance for the film *Independence Day* (1996), Robb explains how the Department of Defense didn't like the script, the biggest problem being that there were "no true military heroes" in the film. The Marine Corps Captain in the script was apparently "not the kind of image the Marine Corps wants of its officers" and the original film made the military appear "impotent and/ or inept". Lt. Dustin Salem, deputy director of the Marine Corps' public affairs office in Los Angeles wrote in a May 15, 1995 memo to one of the film's producers: "The overall scenario does not leave the public with a positive impression of the military and its capabilities", and the Pentagon told filmmaker Dean Devlin that if he wanted the military's assistance he would have to alter the script substantially (Robb 2004, 68).

The cooperation is particularly prevalent in superhero/action blockbusters in which the military and real or fictional military equipment and hardware is on display. For example, when the original *Transformers* was released in 2007, the film utilized over 300 Airmen and a variety of military Aircraft from the Department of Defense, including F-22s, F-117 Nighthawks, CV-22 Osprey, A-10 Thunderbolt II, C-17 Globemaster III, MH-53 Pave Low, HH-53 Super Jolly Green Giant, AC-130 Gunships, C-130 Hercules, and MQ-1 Predator unmanned aerial vehicles. After a special screening of the film for all branches of the military, Chief Master Sgt. Mike Gasparetto exclaimed:

The movie accurately depicted life in the military and I think is a great recruiting tool. The movie did a great job of putting a face on what we do as Airmen and as service members, which I think is important for the general public to see so they understand better our job in protecting them. (*Simmons, 2007*)

It is not insignificant, however, that the military hardware was only acquired after the Pentagon assisted in a mandatory re-writing of the script. By mandating alterations that portray the military in a positive light, the military ensured that the movie would

contribute positively to military morale, recruitment, and popular opinion. Lt. Col. Francisco "Paco" Hamm, the Air Force liaison on *Transformers* declares: "The morale level goes through the roof. There's nothing like an airman taking his family out to *Transformers* and watching the kids see something their father or mother does on the big screen" (Breznican 2009).

The sequel to the film, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* released in summer of 2009, was the biggest joint military operation movie ever made. Featuring the robot superhero Optimus leading NEST, a military organization comprised of military soldiers and the Autobots in a battle against the Decepticons, the U.S military is celebrated (while struggles against the government suggest bureaucratic incompetence detrimental to the security of the world) and military hardware is flaunted in spectacular action sequences (*Transformers: Revenge*). The film featured, for example: two A-10 Thunderbolt II "Warthog" jets, six F-16 Fighting Falcons, an F-22, ten armoured Humvees, two Abrams and two Bradley tanks, two missile-launchers, two armoured personnel carriers, and the Army's Golden Knights parachute team (Spiritual Eyes 2009). The *Transformers* franchise is in fact one of the most conservative superhero narratives in history, portraying women as fools, damsels in distress, and sex objects. *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009) is replete with racist stereotypes such as the "urban ghetto" Transformers. Violence is depicted as glorious and operatic, and the Peter Parker-style hero Sam Witwicky grows into manhood literally "on the field of battle". Members of the American military industrial complex are predominantly presented as heroic, if sometimes comical and bureaucratic, figures. (DiPaolo 2011, 46) While it is arguable that *Transformers* indeed functions primarily as escapist entertainment, it is impossible to

refute not only its political and social relevance and thus its potential function in reproducing particular ideologies, but also the very real and deliberate connections between the American military and their desired representations on screen.

In another example of the symbiotic and mutually reinforcing relationship between the Pentagon and Hollywood, the highly anticipated big-budget Hollywood action film of 2009, *G.I. Joe: The Rise of the Cobra*, premiered not in Los Angeles with the typical glitz and glamour of Hollywood publicity, but at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland to a military audience of service members and their families. American flags flying high, the stars of the movie met with airmen and the base commander and enjoyed a helicopter tour. The message, explain Eller and Fritz (2009), was clear: “if you’re a flag-waving, Nascar-loving American, it’s practically your patriotic duty to see this movie.” In further promotions of its film, Paramount Pictures strategically targeted the “American heartland” through a marketing campaign that distributed newspaper advertisements to over 60 military bases and through a “hometown hero” contest encouraging entrants to write in with stories of “local heroes”—a seven year old whose father served in Iraq with the Navy won the contest (Eller and Fritz 2009). *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra* raked in a studio-estimated \$100 million globally on its opening weekend in 2009, and while this was not the number one selling big budget action movie of the summer, the re-launching of an extensive line of Hasbro action figures before Christmas of that year and the initiation of production of the sequel secured the film as one of the most influential of the year. Indicative of this was when United States Marine Corps Sergeant, Mitchell Paige, was enshrined as a G.I. Joe action figure in recognition of his efforts in a military battle at Guadalcanal in 1942. While the exchange of military money

and assets such as airmen and aircrafts for input into the portrayal of the military seems reasonable on one level, the effect is the portrayal of history deliberately filtered through the Pentagon and the proliferation of militarized ideologies through popular mainstream films to the widest possible audience. In using films as an advertising tool, the narratives and images that have been manipulated by the Pentagon are further enabled through a discourse of patriotism that contribute to both selling tickets and selling the military ethos.

The shift from comics to film as the dominant media for superheroes has proved an ideal, yet more subtle and thus under-recognized, medium for militarization. Hollywood action films, and particularly, superhero films, provide a variety of ways through which a militarized ethos can be represented and celebrated, and as digital technology, consumer desire, audience demographics have shifted (along with political and social circumstances), we can trace the ways in which the militaristic elements in superhero movies have been altered over time. The militarism present in superhero movies is not just reflective of the general predominance of militarized themes, discourses, and bodies in popular culture but is also connected historically to both political events and the capital expenditure within the corporate entertainment industry. For the purposes of this section I will focus briefly on the aesthetics of superhero movies, character identities, and common narratives, which, as will become evident, are all closely interconnected.

The visual aspect of a film is of tremendous importance: most superhero texts have seen numerous style departures over time as the result of a perceived need to maintain social relevance and garner renewed interest and attract audience members. The

aesthetic of the film – including elements such as the production values of editing, sound, camera angle, and perhaps most importantly, special effects (which has tended towards the development of faster, more realistic, and more violent) – is well suited to militarized entertainment. The affect produced by spectacular militarized images, fantastic special effects, and hyper-masculine/homoerotic embodiments can range from physical and emotional responses of excitement and captivation to fear, anxiety, and shock. Most contemporary action and superhero films have adopted the visual language and aesthetic of comic books; “The rhythm of constant hyper- violence of today’s action movies comes straight from Jack Kirby” (Knowles 2007, 18). In turn, the new superhero films have become reminiscent more of the traditional combat movie as visual drama, violence, noise, and spectacular combat scenes overshadow narrative and personal dramas (Suid 2002, 188).

Visual pleasure functions centrally in the way images of militarization are mobilized - that is, if we accept that popular cinema is as much concerned with aesthetics as it is with narrative, then we need to consider the hugely successful market in selling the experience of militarism and heroism. The popularity of these films suggest that millions of people desire to know what it “feels like” to be a superhero, to “experience” having superpowers and super-weapons with which to fight “bad guys”, to imagine what it may be like to have the most technologically advanced arsenal of military weapons at your disposal and “super” intelligence to allow you to hunt down your enemies. That these imaginings create feelings of exhilaration, suspense, fear, and/or joy for audience members is a key goal for filmmakers; understanding *what* those experiences might be and how they might be differently felt based on individual identities and positions is an

important task for the critical scholar (Tasker 2000, 5-9). That is, the production and consumption of the text are important to read in relation to other texts, historical circumstances, and society and the commodification of militarism through the popular superhero depends on the overlapping networks of power involved in their reproduction.

The superhero himself can embody an ethos of militarism through identity formation, corporeality, costume/armour, and superpowers/weapons and it is evident that such aspects have changed considerably over time. The patriotic soldier superhero of WWII and the Cold War that comic book readers were so familiar with began to undergo modifications as threat of another world war dissipated, and the industry exploded with new characters. The elements that defined superheroes in WWII and the Cold War film and comic books albeit are still present in contemporary characterizations of superheroes but are increasingly being represented by “true-to life” protagonists who more overtly embody the value(s) of militarized hyper-masculinity. These new more “realistic” characterizations of superheroes are often ultra-violent and they are regularly portrayed as exercising violence indiscriminately. Interestingly, it was following the success of comics with GIs overseas during WWII that led largely to increasingly adult orientation and content: Sabin argues that when the publishers discovered how well the comics were doing on military bases, they began to add more sophisticated elements to appeal to this new audience and from this trend adult readership grew (1993, 147-148). Likewise contemporary films and comic books are increasingly focusing on the assortment of weapons used by superheroes to fight their enemies, so much so, that the use of these weapons and the death and destruction that results from their use is seemingly being celebrated, glorified, and made downright sexy.

With the success of comic re-boots such as *Batman: The Dark Night* (2008) a different type of creator began to emerge in the 1990s who looked to profit, and a new generation of popular heroes were born that included “violent maniacs who spend most of their time engaging in pointless battles with each other” and a sort of “crack-cocaine version of superheroes” (Knowles 2007, 6-7). The fantasy of empowerment shifted from an incredibly powerful but genteel and civil Superman to an incredibly powerful but angry violent Batman, Wolverine, and Punisher (Fingeroth 2004, 119-121); “Despite their protestations to the contrary, most Americans like to watch violence” (Suid 2002, 673) The superhero genre functions well with this turn to hyper-violence, with contemporary films often mixing humour with killing which receives positive audience reception:

Another research study carried out on violence in films found that viewers considered its representation most disturbing and horrifying when it was serious and realistic, accompanied by strong language and unfairly meted out to its victims. However, if even very graphic acts of violence were represented in a humorous and light-hearted way then they could be entertaining and not seem violent. This was because such acts are not meant to be taken seriously. (Strinati 2000, 176)

These contemporary embodiments and their historical transformations can help tell us about ourselves for, as Ndalianis (2007) explains, the development of the superhero has reflected the transitions of society and the archetypal themes and characters reflect the ideologies and cultural conditions that produce them (4). The transitions to and from ultra-violent characters and the violent means these characters are justified utilizing in order to “save civilization” is possibly a reflection of the primacy given to militarized violence in international society to achieve order. The way in which this violence is intertwined with humour suggests the need for this violence to be packaged in particular ways for it to be deemed acceptable and thus profitable.

Power, a trait that is regularly treated with disapproval in Hollywood films – recall the old maxim “power corrupts” (Christensen and Haas 2005, 13) – is becoming ubiquitous with the modern day superhero. The “dark, violent vigilantes” that were so popular in the 1980s and early 1990s (such as Wolverine, Frank Miller’s Dark Knight, and the Punisher) who represented a new kind of superhero that was “no longer even likable, never mind admirable or worth emulating” (Knowles 2007, 11), are now the everyday superhero, only the “nasty” traits are amplified to contribute to the exciting, sexy, and gritty but fallible nature of the modern day superhero. For example, while in the past superheroes were often depicted as selfless, “godlike” figures, today it is not uncommon for them to be power hungry as well, desiring recognition and status for their service to the community, nation, or the world. Consider the egoism of Tony Stark/Iron Man, boasting of his exploits and relishing in his star status with the general public (which reaches a ridiculously extravagant pinnacle with the “Stark Expo”, a showcase of his latest inventions):

Senator Stern: Our priority here is to have you turn over the Iron Man weapon to the American people.

Tony Stark: Well, you can forget it. We're safe. America is secure. You want my property - you can't have it! But I did you a big favor.
[Stands and turns to face the Senate gallery]

Tony Stark: I have successfully privatized world peace. [He flashes the peace sign, to standing applause] (*Iron Man 2*, 2010)

The ethic of responsibility, restraint and humility that has traditionally corresponded to having special powers in the superhero world has eroded (Zimmerman 2004, 24). If, as Zimmerman (2004) argues, our ethics are reflected in and shaped by our popular superheroes, then while Superman and superheroes like him of the past represented “what is noble and worth pursuing”, the portrayal of Tony Stark/Iron Man (and others such as

The Green Lantern and Hancock) suggests that fame and fortune are the pinnacle of human achievement. Simply put, as a character with seemingly unlimited access to wealth, beautiful women, and the latest and greatest weapons technology Tony Stark is a glowing embodiment of contemporary North American society's fascination with celebrity, wealth, technology and military power.

Recognizing that contemporary superheroes take many forms, one common trait that distinguishes these superheroes from the characters of the past is that today's superheroes seem to have become more like us: they are morally fallible, they are often motivated by revenge and vigilantism, and they often look more like the average human than superhuman. As Zimmerman (2004) puts it, "less godlike, more like real people... someone human but with great power, constantly tempted by things" (83). The equation of physical strength with "goodness" and weakness with moral deficiency however, is maintained through other elements, primarily associations with militarism: many of the most popular superheroes today include characters whose powers are primarily superior fighting skills, access to powerful weapons, and/or remarkable intelligence in the fields of military science and technology. The super-powered but "troubled" hero represents the current primary paradigm of super-heroism (Coogan 2006, 200). The lines have blurred to the extent that the action hero and the superhero are almost interchangeable (partly the result of the explosion of superheroes on film), and the result is that superheroes have become more exciting to watch but also more relatable to the average viewer.

Contemporary superheroes, like action heroes, appeal to audiences through a fusion of content and form, or, a "cinema of action": "the well written, well-performed, well-crafted action movie offers its audience something more vital than excitement" explains

Lichtenfield, “It offers a sense that the characters are actually experiencing what the filmmakers stage”, and allows the audience to fully perceive in the components of the action: “the struggle to overcome obstacles, to enact motion and to embody the will involved” (2007, 344). Superheroes, like action heroes, “respond to mortal threats directed at their weaknesses, overcome obstacles of increasing difficulty, and finally face (and vanquish) their nemesis to transform the world for the better” which, is typically, to restore the status quo, and thus become a “cathartic but disempowering articulation of the mechanisms of the real exercise of power” (O’Brian 2012, 3).

The turn to more realistic, fallible characters is also associated with the shift from the divine heritage of superheroes to military science as the origin of their superpowers. The origin stories of re-incarnated superheroes are often a result of the military-industrial complex or scientific and military related experiments gone wrong: Hugo Danner was the result of a biological experiment, the Flash was a lab accident, and Wolverine while born a mutant, had his powers augmented by military science experiments. In most cases Gods are no longer the origin or source of superheroes and their powers (LoCicero 2008, 201-2). Batman has a sophisticated armory of super-weapons, a “technological treasure chest”, Bat-mobile, Bat-plane, Bat-copter (Ibid. 223), Spiderman derives his powers from a laboratory mishap (Ibid. 226), Tony Stark becomes Iron Man by virtue of “nothing more than his intelligence and advanced technology” (Rieder 2010, 38). This nod to realism is important because many of these fantasies do not require that we live in an alternate universe - all we would need to live in their world is a slight advancement in technology (39). Superheroes are thus emblematic of ordinary subjects flirting with the possibility of post-human existences, achieved through science and military technology.

Batman's "superpowers", for example, have historically depended on military defense strategies and weapons:

His belt carries essential tools and weapons. His cape holds the overflow of such devices but is also chemically treated to protect him from a variety of attacks and can serve as a parachute in a pinch. His head covering is wired for communication with teammates. His choice of colors [sic] lend itself to his stealth work, and his covered eye and imposing appearance give him psychological advantage over his opponents. (Zimmerman 2007, 48)

The most popular superheroes today are in fact embodiments of future military weapons applications for technology, as will be discussed more in depth in Chapter 5.

The realistic military technology and narratives revolving around violent battles using realistic military weapons and an obsession with technological superiority combine with computer graphics and digitized special effects to produce exciting, action-packed films. The trend towards increasingly visceral portrayals of military technology situations is problematic: the blurring of any distinction between reality and fantasy functions to filter war, to obscure the problems of relying on technology and violence, and to distort the demonization of others upon which the systems of war rely. The filtering leaves only "clean war", glamorous fighting sequences, and the superiority of technology, and insurmountable power over one's enemies. Simultaneously futuristic and yet realistic battle sequences, armour and weaponry operate in the absence of any real consequences; there is rarely any blood in superhero movies, and the superhero (almost) never dies. War is exciting, battle is exhilarating, and the very real cost of military service, and military violence is made invisible.

One of the most important mainstays of the superhero genre is the attempt to create a narrative that, although fictional, is relatable to the audience. Superhero narratives and the realities of social and political life are deliberately linked, and the

recent commercial success of superhero films, Angela Ndaljianis (2007) argues, is partly attributable to the associations they make to real world political events such as 9/11 which has been cited as a catalyst for the modern revival of the superhero genre. The “realistic fantasy” has been gaining in popularity and in fact the comic book market has been indulging readers’ desire for more true to life plots and narratives since the 1950s. Fans, argues Zimmerman (2004), “bought comic book versions of the world that indulged their anxieties, not ignored them” (88). Consider, for example the change in context for Iron Man’s origin story from the war in Vietnam in the comic book rendition to the war in Afghanistan in the movie rendition, or that the central theme of *G.I. Joe: The Rise of the Cobra* (2009) is the use of nanotechnology weapons and illegal arms dealing. Interestingly, even when contemporary superhero films are set in a historical context, such as *The Watchmen* (2009), themes of militarism, the threat of an external/ foreign ‘other’ and the celebration of technology as a cure-all for societal ills seep from the screen thereby ensuring such films are compelling contemporary texts.

Despite alterations to make contemporarily relevant narratives, the films also maintain relevancy through the essence of the traditional heroism mythos. As Ndaljianis (2007) explains, “Heroes and superheroes have never operated in a vacuum... whether conscious or unconscious, hero narratives give substance to certain ideological myths about the society they address” (3). There can be several consequences of the hero myth, however. For instance, it may function to reinforce the status quo; that “bad people can mess up the system and good ones can set it right” (Christensen and Haas 2005, 13) and the superhero as a manifestation of the concept of the struggle for the survival of civilization and the maintenance of world order in the face of chaos (Ndalianis 2007, 3).

Complex problems of society become simplified and resolutions easy, enabling the hero to fix problems and dissuade fears in one fell swoop. The immediate result is that problems become reduced to the fault of an individual “bad guy” (as explored in the previous chapter) which, with the help of a heroic figure, can quickly be solved and thus satisfy the audience with a happy ending. These narratives also send important messages about the need for or lack of democratic participation and political change. After all, “...if heroes and heroines always come to the rescue, perhaps there is no need to fight city hall” (Christensen and Haas 2005, 13).

Such “dramas of reassurance” tend to ignore the complexity of political and social problems and invested interests in particular resolutions, such as our reliance on the military and war to resolve conflict (Ibid.). The whole idea of heroism, claims Baker, “reduces social problems to individual agency, thereby masking the systemic nature of economic conditions by encouraging individualistic solutions” (2009, 268). The superhero mission is, after all, to preserve society – not reinvent it (Reynolds, 1994, 77). In the face of the modern-day militarized superheroes explored throughout this chapter, the consequence of the hero-myth or the American monomyth may be more disconcerting: no matter how violent, disturbed, or controversial their mission, the superhero remains for most, unquestionably our admirable, honorable hero. Hollywood will not likely ever cease in making movies about the military, exclaims Robb, because “Hollywood loves heroes, and the military has more of them than anyone else” (2004, 367). Heroes are both exciting, traditionally patriotic, and are “legitimately” and “justifiably” violent “for the good of the people”: a perfect specimen for the reproduction of militarism.

Perpetuating a Culture of Militarism

...militarization creeps into ordinary daily routines; it threads its way amid memos, laundry, lovemaking, and the clinking of frosted beer glasses. Militarization is such a pervasive process, and thus so hard to uproot, precisely because in its everyday forms it scarcely looks life threatening. (Enloe 2000, 3)

The heroes of comic books were born in and of war: “Comic book superheroes were born and came of age in the bloodiest century of human history. American soldiers have read superhero comics in every military conflict since World War II. Superheroes have wrestled with the call to love of country and the duty to serve from their earliest days...” (Zimmerman 2004, 86). The contemporary representations of superheroes, in spite of modifications from overt patriotism military dominance continue to maintain relevancy to a contemporary audience. They also continue to reproduce tropes that construct knowledge of what is good and bad and maintain an ideology that of the inevitability of war and the necessity of a technologically superior military. The militarized symbolism present in contemporary superheroes such as Iron Man, Batman, and G.I. Joe is not always the palpable patriotism of the flag waving Captain America from the Golden Age, but is potentially even more disconcerting: today’s heroes often work for the US government, “serve” their country on the ground and abroad, brandish military weapons and armour, do not hesitate to utilize violence, and espouse neoliberal values, the penultimate in modern patriotism. As Zimmerman (2004) argues, this shift has paralleled the continuing redefinition of patriotism in the US. Moreover, the motives, themes, dialogues, and images in superhero films are hypermasculinized, raced, classed, and violent, and the mass distribution of such representations have the ability to influence the way we think about the military, security and war. The militarism present in popular cinema is made even more effective and therefore more dangerous because it is done so subtly that “the American people don’t even know it’s there” (Robb 2004, 365).

What are the consequences of an abundance of militarized heroes? “Certainly”, Robb argues “the American people have become a more warlike people in the last fifty years” (Ibid.). While it is difficult to substantiate such a claim, the message resonates: a culture of militarism - where, as Boggs and Pollard (2007) explain, themes of war, combat, and patriotism resonate throughout society - prominent in American society, has historically been and continues to be romanticized, aestheticized and glorified in the film industry, both intentionally and unintentionally. This has the ability to function as both a recruitment tool as well as to discourage potential discussion of alternatives to military warfare (ix-xi). The greatest impact of the “Hollywood war machine”, Boggs and Pollard explain vehemently, may be borne by the “youthful mass audiences that are the main targets of increasingly desperate Pentagon recruiters anxious to renovate a crisis-ridden military” (2007, xi).

It is not unsurprising that there is a mutual understanding by the Department of Defense and the major producers in Hollywood that militaristic images, plots, and references sell; the mainstream audience obsession with fast paced, action-packed, larger-than life big-budget superhero films provides an enormous market for representations of militarism. The legacy of superhero narratives that celebrate militarized “justice” reproduces mainstream problematic narratives of power, binary oppositions of “good” vs. “evil” and “us” vs. “them”, hierarchies of gender and race, and legitimate violence, have become a part of the discourse that structures our realities and that get mobilized when in/security is comprehended as under threat.

If film can be used to celebrate militarism, however, it can and has been used to advocate peace. In the late 1920s, the potential of motion pictures to inform audiences of

the undue cost of war and possibilities for a more peaceful world began to be explored by antiwar activists. Warner Bros' Harry M. Warner called motion pictures "The New Ambassador of Good Will" in a 1928 radio program, pronouncing that films have the ability to "reach directly the heart and mind of the individual" and could "contribute to abolishing war by engendering mutual understanding and empathy among the masses of every race and nation" (Chambers II (2008), 198). The 1930s saw an influx of "disillusionment" films expressing horror of modern warfare, including the now classic adaptation of the novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), which demonstrated that films could be critical of war and violence, and still be exciting and profitable (Ibid., 199). Not surprisingly, critics of antiwar films condemned such films as unpatriotic and dangerous for the security and defense of the nation, some even labeling them Communist propaganda. *All Quiet on the Western Front* was accused by some conservative commentators as a film that challenges the military and authority and will "go far to raise a race of yellow streaks, slackers and disloyalists" (Chambers II 2008, 202). Interestingly, the novel was banned and burned in Nazi Germany. There is the question, therefore, of whether Hollywood could produce films that challenge some of the dominant militarized narratives but remain box office successes.

Considering the pre-WWII films of the 1930s, Chambers II asks why Hollywood "merely encouraged excitement and revulsion against the horrors of warfare" rather than exploring the causes of war, the morality of violence, or policy choices. Is it at all possible, he asks, that Hollywood could make films that delve into such issues in an educated manner? (216) Chambers II answers his own question: Hollywood's *raison d'être* is to produce profitable and entertaining movies, not to educate the public.

Nonetheless, it is important that there are more and more obvious elements of subversion and subversive/anti-war themes in more recently released superhero films. It is noteworthy, for example, that despite the central theme of the importance and magnitude of technological innovations in the *Iron Man* films, Iron Man is presented as losing control of his technology repeatedly (Rieder 2010, 68), alluding to a common fear of technology “taking over” and perhaps serving as a warning of our reliance on technology in general and military technology in particular. Themes in the Iron Man and Captain America series often center on concerns for advancements in technology and military action operating in a legal and ethical vacuum (as discussed in Chapter 5), or simply emphasize the ambiguities in war and politics: in the sequel *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, Steve Rodgers is a veteran completely disillusioned by a more complex world and becomes a fugitive when the organization he trusts is subverted by his enemies. The plot calls into question the simplicity of “good” versus “evil” and the danger in trusting organizations with unchecked power.²⁵

Contemporary comics have always leaned towards political and social critique, and have increasingly been uncompromising in exploring political and ethical quandaries. Following a trend in the 1980s and 1990s when most comics killed off the more stereotypical ethnic characters, Captain America entered the 21st Century learning the troubling truth about his origins: the super-soldier serum that had bestowed him with superpowers had been developed via failed experiments on African American soldiers revealing, as Zimmerman (2004) explains, that “the face of American heroism had a

²⁵ Several hugely successful blockbuster films released after the writing of this thesis including *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018), and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) all have underlying anti-war sentiments.

history that included the exploitation of Black America” (76). One of the most popular comics and Hollywood film adaptations is the *X-Men* series which explicitly tackles discrimination in society and confronts head on the human cost of marginalization by making parallels between the legalized discrimination of mutants to racial discrimination in the US (78). Overt opposition to militarism as the predominant narrative has for the most part however, been primarily limited to underground comics and independently made films. The underground war comic *The Legion of Charlies* for instance, was a gory book produced during the Vietnam war that, by collapsing the war and the Manson murders into one narrative effectively condemns both the American government, military, and justice system, confronts post-traumatic stress disorder and military training or ‘brainwashing’, and blurs the line between killing on the battlefield and murder in society (Kendall 2007, 253). The underground comics of post-war Vietnam and “war comics” published outside of the US make up some of the most critically insightful texts, such as Keiji Nakaawa’s *I saw it: The Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima: A Survivor’s True Story* (2007) (titled *Ore wa Mita* in Japanese) which is a hauntingly illustrated criticism of Japanese militarism and the American bombing told through the eyes of the narrator/character Nakaawa’s own childhood experience.

As Williams shows (1997, 110), however, while the “anti-hegemonic, anti-authority, anti-war sentiment” prevalent in ‘underground’ comics are found within popular mediums, they remain for the most part: 1) limited to the opinions expressed by individual characters, 2) are overcome in the end by techno-liberal militarism, or 3) are ultimately overshadowed by the spectacular action sequences glorifying the military. Returning to superheroes in comics, we see this for example in Chapter 4 of the

Ultimates, Super-Human Vol. 1 (2002), when the reader encounters The Mighty Thor, Norse God of Thunder, critical of the US military and the military-industrial complex and the new super-soldier super-human unit that is being created to replace the army:

Bruce Banner: “The Ultimates isn’t an army, Mister. They’re a team of super heroes we assembled to take care of the post-human problems the armed forces can’t handle anymore.

Thor: Oh, it matters not whether you are wearing capes or combat boots, little man. You are all just thugs in uniform who will smash any threat to a corrupt status quo...Go back to your paymasters and tell them that the Son of Odin is not interested in working for a military industrial complex who engineers wars and murders innocents....Your talk might be of super-villains now, but it is only a matter of time before you are sent to kill for oil or free trade. (The Ultimates 2002)

By the end of the volume however, Thor has bargained with the American President and in exchange for doubling the International Aid budget he joins the super-soldier program. As discussed in Chapter 2, in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), the plot indeed revolves around themes of justified violence, the security paradox of protection for some that results in harm for others, and the importance and also dangers of political oversight, provoking us to question, perhaps, whether there might not be something wrong with the way we “do” politics. It is the aesthetic of the film, however, that is important to not dismiss: non-stop physical action, spectacular computer enhanced scenes of superheroes fighting each other, and violence, rather than dialogue, as the means to resolution.

Such examples reveal how heroes and myths are created and altered in constructive ways in response to social changes, needs, and desires (Ndalianis 2007, 3), and can develop out of self-reflection and/or audience response. Whether or not the audience reads such instances as critique ultimately depends on the interpretation of the audience; films are often after all, argues Kellner, “complex, multilayered, and open to multiple readings” (2010, 2). So are we to resign ourselves that as the audience we are

simply open and vulnerable to the influences on screen, or as Strinati (2000) proposes, are viewers capable of “exercising power in their own right by ignoring or resisting these influences, even turning them to their advantage” (178)? As research on spectatorship suggests, viewers bring their own preconceptions to a film, which means that occasionally, drastically different messages can be garnered from the same film (Chambers II 2008, 216-7). Carruthers explains that it is impossible to measure how a film impacts an audience: “How to disentangle the influence of film” she asks, “from off-screen determinants of morale, and individual beliefs and predispositions which bear on viewers’ appreciation of what unspools before them?” (2000, 72). To return to our example of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, despite the critical intentions of the creators to reveal the drudgery of war, many interpreted the film adaptation of the 1930s novel as just another “exciting action movie” (Chambers, 2008, 207). Viewers are not empty vessels – they arrive at the theatre with their own preconceptions and therefore can have very different receptions to the same film. Thus, even when a filmmakers’ intentions are to make a critical statement, the audience may not get the message, particularly when audiences are so conditioned to equate blockbuster films with non-intellectual excitement and entertainment. As Suid articulates of the war film genre: “Planes, bombs, guns, the destruction they cause, the very elements that filmmakers believe show the evil of war ultimately provide the attraction that makes war films so popular” (2002, 6). Is it possible to create an entertaining and successful Hollywood superhero movie that is critical of all of the elements that necessarily by definition comprise it?

This chapter has considered the complex and historically symbiotic relationship between the entertainment industry and militarism in the US and the way in which this

relationship has functioned to reproduce militarism. It is possible that the hyper-militarized construction of contemporary superheroes and the continued efforts by the Pentagon to produce films which frame the military in a positive light is a reflection of a crisis of militarism; evidence of a desperation to entice new recruits in an environment in which the effectiveness of militaries in non-traditional wars is in question and public unease with unilateral and pre-emptive strikes, the use of torture, and the emergence of the US Patriot Act and racial profiling has increased. It is also possible that the military-media-superhero playground enables a displacement of innate desires or aggressions, allowing us to “become” our favorite superhero, if only for a brief moment, and indulge in fantasy war-making without ever picking up a real weapon. Whether or not we are aware of it, however, the possibility that “we are programmed by pop culture” as Knowles stated, and that as Fingeroth explains, ‘superhero culture’ is “the metaphorical prism through which we see – and live – our lives” (Fingeroth 2004, Cover) is nonetheless an indictment to pay attention to the entanglement of superheroes and militarism.

Advances in digital technology and computer graphics are creating possibilities for filmmakers to produce realistic portrayals of war and violence, militaristic combat and the super-heroic use of weaponry – whether intended as celebration or critique - without requiring such a partnership between Hollywood and the military (a relationship which as we have seen has been sustained largely as a result of the expensive cost of procuring the use of military machines and personnel for films (Rollins and O’Connor 2008, 31). Indeed, the potential for high paced/action/superhero films that critique violence and militarism, for films which achieve financial box office success but espouse

messages of peace and nonviolence, is increasing. Then again, one must ask whether or not such transgression has potential when it may be the continual rewriting of militaristic heroic characters and narratives or the images themselves - of war and violence, militaristic combat and superhero displays of weaponry – that continue to foster support for militarization. War, militarism, and politics is also written and displayed on and through the body of superhero characters. The design, dress, movement and action of the body and the multiple and malleable masculinities embedded in these representations signify particular ideological beliefs and practices. Feminist scholars have contributed significantly through their analyses on male heroic figures, masculinity, and the connections between representations of hyper-masculinity and the normalization of violence. The chapters that follow draw on these insights to enquire into the specific aesthetic productions of the masculine/muscular corporeality of contemporary Hollywood superheroes and how its various, malleable, and hybrid forms in conjunction with their “super” armour and abilities that draw on real advancements in military technology (and in turn stimulate developments in real military research) contributes to the entanglement of militarism and the popularity of superheroes.

Chapter Five – Masculinities, Militarism, and the Superhero Body

Tough guys are men who don't back down, no matter how intimidating the circumstances may be. They are omnipotent, all-powerful. They are the winners in a world of losers... (Neibaur 1995, 1)

The veritable pantheon of modern superhero figures that drive contemporary popular culture reflect and reproduce a militarized ethos through representations of a dynamic militarism. The previous chapter exposed the mutually constitutive relationship between the superhero genre and the production of militarization that has implications for our perception of and participation in military conflict and the processes of militarization and securitization. The super-saturation of superheroes necessitates a cognizance of the relationship between these modern day gods and the normalization of militarized ideologies.

The convergence of aesthetics and war, militarism, and security being critically examined in this dissertation is probably most visibly played out on and through the site of the superhero body. Militarism and war have, historically, marked and formed the superhero body in visual and discursive ways, for instance through the form of hyper-muscular masculinity, patriotic costumes and nationalistic symbolism, and the race and gender of mainstream superheroes. Indeed, one could argue that the militarized masculinity and securitizing practices explored in the previous chapters have been part of a regulatory practice that has produced the bodies of “ideal-type” superheroes. Today politics is embodied in these characters in ways that reify but also challenge militarism and masculinity. The moulding of the physique to transform it into one that represents militaristic ideals, the endurance of physical trauma and torture, and the synthesis of animals, technology, and armour with the superhero form are just some of the corporeal

dimensions of war that plays out on the body as a site for violence and contestation.

Gender/masculinity and heroism/security are made visible through the manufacture of superheroes, as something that we construct.

It is at this nexus between the bodily form and power, masculinity and strength, and security and force, that this chapter further unpacks the entanglements of militarism, security and superheroes by exploring the materiality and signification of their shifting and contradictory bodies in Hollywood cinema. Their representations are intimately connected to hegemonic norms of gender which reproduce a legitimised heroic subject (as discussed in Chapter 1 and 2), and, as has been discussed in the previous chapter, maintains the excluded other. This is performed through the linking of violence with heroism and the perpetuation of this problematic relationship as normative masculinity.

Through an inquiry into the various ways superhero masculinities are constituted – through the superhero body, dress, armour, and action/ narrative – it becomes apparent that what appears to remain constant through shifting aesthetic styles and narratives over time is the continued preservation of a hyper- masculine warrior ethos. As Butler states, however, that regulatory norms must be forcibly reiterated is a sign that “materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled” (Butler 1993, 2). Contemporary superheroes are thus a site of both reproduction and contestation of masculine militarized logics that, as unpacked in the rest of the thesis, play out through the politics, security/militaristic narratives, glorification of military technology, and special effects of these films.

A Typology of Superhero Masculinities: from the Super “Ordinary” to the Post-Human

Masculinity is always mutable, shifting and being reframed. Hollywood’s superheroes exhibit a variety of characteristics that indicate the disruption and destabilization of historically naturalized heroic subjects. Recognising the mutability of masculinity exposes its nature as an ideological structure, which can, as Rehling contends, “shatter the illusion that normative masculinity is a seamless identity, revealing it instead to be a volatile category...” (2009, 3). Masculinity has been explored as performance, spectacle, and/or masquerade (Cohen and Hark 1993). Holmlund (1993, 213-229, joining Lacan (1958), Butler (1993) and others, compellingly reveals the usefulness of examining masculinity (as well as femininity) as a series of interlocking and overlapping masquerades that constitute specific relations to power and dissonance. For Lacan, Holmlund notes, male masquerade is intricately connected to power structures: “the trappings of authority, hierarchy, order, position make the man” (Holmlund 1993, 213; Lacan 1958, 85). Masculine masquerades are in no way then “benign variations” but are potent gestures that have concrete effects (Holmlund 1993, 214). Acknowledging the relationship between constructions of masculinity and historical specificities can help us unpack how desires, anxieties and politico-social events play through representational masculinities in popular culture. That these representations contribute to one’s own identity formation requires that we pay attention to the way in which they are produced, consumed, reified, and altered over time.

There exists no better example of the masculine masquerade in popular culture than that of the superhero who both literally and figuratively dons a mask, and just as masculinity cannot be defined as a monolithic or static category, as it is “in constant flux,

subject to historically contingent, cultural, social, economic, political, and psychic forces” (Rehling 2009, 4), superhero masculinities are diverse and dynamic, reflective of the variety of Superheroes in popular culture. While any attempt to categorize superheroes into typologies must recognize that these identities are constantly shifting and overlapping – and are often present within the same character, as with the very nature of superheroes dual identity – it is helpful to distinguish the most popular characteristics within the mainstream superhero genre at present and how they intersect with militarism and masculinity. Engaging with Hollywood superhero films from the past several decades, the characters I have predominantly encountered can be loosely grouped into four overlapping categories of masculinity: the patriotic saviour, the ordinary or average hero, the neoliberal playboy, and the mutant/beast/cyborg (or post-human).²⁶ These categories are by no means singular or exhaustive, but represent a typology I have created to assist in deconstructing and understanding the complexity of contemporary Hollywood superheroes.

The archetype of the patriotic war-time superhero of The Golden Age of superheroes discussed in the previous chapter is overtly identifiable in physical form by his magnificent size, extraordinary physical strength and endurance, and his ability to inspire fear in his enemies often through his sheer size and strength. Indeed, the archetypal superhero is “an athlete, acrobat and super-sleuth”, a hyper-masculine physical specimen whose body is often a result of his “God-like” origins or “honed to peak form through ceaseless exercise...his excellent physical condition is very important”

²⁶ While some might suggest that the popularity of “vigilante” or “reluctant anti-heroes” are in their own sub category, these characteristics typically overlap with almost every aforementioned category and thus are interwoven throughout the discussion.

(LoCicero 2008, 223). While not invulnerable, these superhero bodies are often “on the receiving end of physical punishment” and thus must be able to “take a beating” and quickly recover from unconscionable injuries and inevitably return to “fight another day” (LoCicero 2008, 223). It is this physical prowess combined with the defiance of “physical, spatial or chronological boundaries” that is most reminiscent of the Norse, Roman, Greek, Babylonian, Indian, Egyptian, Persian and Finnish gods or ancient human-heroes worshipped as deities (Ibid 3-7), often blurring the lines between god and man. For both ancient and modern day figures their heroic namesake is typically earned by “their ability to dominate the battlefield through sheer physical strength”:

When facing off against the towering Babylonian hero, Gilgamesh, or the equally awe inspiring Persian giant, Rustam, an adversary is doomed before the first blow is struck. Entire armies fall before the onslaught of the great superhero of India, Rama, and the rivers, streams and fields are scarcely large enough to accommodate the corpses of those unfortunate enough to arouse the ire of Siegfried, Achilles or Aeneas. The gods themselves must have marveled as Hercules took the full weight of our planet from Atlas and bore it on his broad shoulders, or as they watched him defeat Thanatos (death) in a wrestling match. (LoCicero 2008, 4)

The strong physical body of the superhero archetype is the obligatory design for his desired purpose: to physically fight and defeat his enemies.

A version of this muscular male body on display has always been a familiar spectacle in the action film genre; the hyper-masculinized, hyper-muscular body of action stars such as that displayed by Sylvester Stallone’s character in *First Blood* (1982) and the subsequent *Rambo* films (1985; 1988; 2008) and the body of real life competitive weight lifter Arnold Schwarzenegger, became synonymous with action heroes. Although when superheroes made their first appearance on television their bodies were very much representative of the average man donning tights and a cape, the hyper-muscular physique popular in action films and comic books very quickly became the norm. In

contemporary superhero films such as *Thor* (2011), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) and *G.I. Joe: The Rise of the Cobra* (2009) the hyper-muscular physique conveys superior strength, agility, and impenetrability: a warrior, provider of security, and physical embodiment of heroism. The fantasy of a primal combatant, the “ideal masculinity” of these superheroes reflects the value of and desire for, among many social groups, a return to traditional gender hierarchies and simplistic notions of heroism and security. Here power and authority/heroism and security are made overtly visible in the muscularity of the male body. Further, the “muscular power” and “hard-edged masculinity” of such characters, argues Tasker, can be read as functioning as both a “sexist assertion of male dominance” and of a “thuggishly violent nationalistic” machismo (Tasker 1993, 91-108). Here, power (and powerlessness) operates in its most physical sense, paraded as a sexual, political, and cultural embodiment of masculine idealism.

The patriotic/muscular saviour has retained its popularity in contemporary Hollywood, visible in the box office sales of films with hard-bodied protagonists such as Marvels’ *Captain America* and DC Comics’ *Superman*. Variations on a more relatable and “ordinary” hero with average bodies have, however, also found tremendous popularity. A plethora of both films and television shows in the superhero sub-genre such as *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010), *Kick Ass* (2010), *No Ordinary Family* (2010-2011), *The Incredibles* (2004), *Heroes* (2006-2010), and *Sky High* (2005) all put the “common man” (or child/teenager) front and centre as superhero protagonists. Spoto provides an excellent description of this “ordinary guy next door”:

He leads a quiet life, does his work, propagates the race. He’s not too ambitious, professionally; he’s not too advanced, educationally. He’s patriotic and idealistic,

but not heroic, unless he's pushed too far, and then heroism is usually an accident. He's resilient and doesn't make great demands on life. He's self-reliant, cheerful, and generous... He's somewhat awkward with women, but secretly presumptuous about his power over them, He's attractively shy... But he's serious about the work ethic and intent on improving his place in society. (Spoto 1978, 2)

These average superheroes are heroes we can identify with because, in many ways, they are just like "us", Austerlitz suggests: "Where superheroes past were more of the man-of-steel variety, indestructible and incontrovertibly adult, the new superhero is boyish, ambivalent, and flawed" (2011, 1). Physically, the bodies of these heroes are depicted as average, even below-average in stature. Putting the heroes' weakness and shortcomings front and centre, ordinary superheroes speak to contemporary audiences because they are depicted as imperfect. An excellent contemporary example of such flawed heroes in film is found in the characters of *The Fantastic Four* (2015) and *Spiderman* (2002; 2004; 2007; 2012): "Each has flaws and personal problems, which only makes them more interesting" (Krensky 2008, 58). Their portrayals as often shy and awkward, with personal and family problems, and who acquire their superpowers as a result of somewhat unwise and thoughtless actions, make them very human and thus emotionally and physically relatable.

The technique of attracting audiences by appealing to their own sense of inadequacies is not new: Neibaur reminds us of the way in which the Rocky movies played upon the sympathies of audiences who, "haunted by their own insecurities", could relate to the battle between a nobody and a somebody (1995, 209-10)²⁷. Arguably, one might conclude that the masculinity of these characters has correspondingly been rendered ambiguous, however it is of critical importance that the film narrative (as a pre-

²⁷ In these films, Stallone's character Rocky, is presented as not as intelligent, wealthy, charismatic, or skilled as his opponent, and rather becomes heroic through training, perseverance, and heart.

condition of the heroic genre) resolves this ambiguity. This is achieved by the protagonist through the acquisition of extraordinary physical abilities and/or powers which are often accompanied by the transformation of the ordinary physical form to one which is “super-human” (for example the stretchable limbs of Reed - Mister Fantastic - or Johnny’s - The Human Torch - super speed and flames in *The Fantastic Four* (2015)) and/or by a triumphant victory on the part of the hero/superhero in (a) violent battle(s) which will be discussed further below. Additionally, it is, as Neibaur argues, the “toughness” and “all-American never say die spirit” that remains front and centre for the arc of these heroes, maintaining his tough guy heroic status. It is significant, however, that in Spoto’s account the “common man” is first and foremost a neoliberal subject; the ordinary superhero reasserts masculinity solely as the domain of a capitalist, patriotic, patriarchal figure. Gender and militarism gets played out here in more subtle ways: although the bodies of ordinary heroes may not exude a normative ideal-type physical masculinity, just as Steve Rodger’s body was frail and weak before military experimentation and physical transformation, his desire to fight and his militarized spirit and bravery branded him as even more “heroic” than the others (this example of Rodger’s transformation will be discussed further below). Indeed, it may be that it is not the inadequacies and ordinariness of the everyday hero that appeals to us, but rather their potential and inevitable transformation into something “super” as the genre prefigures.

Rather than reflections of our flaws, by contrast some characters are fantastical embodiments of the consumer cultures’ manufacture of our desires, ambitions, and even guilty pleasures: they are who we wish we could be, or at least fun to imagine. These superheroes are handsome, cocky, and ridiculously wealthy sex symbols. Many own their

own mansions, luxury cars and private jets, are CEOs of their own corporations, and some even rule their own country. What I call the “neoliberal playboy”, and others have termed the “narcissistic and leisure-oriented brand of masculinity” (Osgerby 2001, 45), is most visible in characters such as Batman, Iron Man, and the Green Hornet. Combining the traditional heroic narrative with wealth, style, and seductive charm, these are modern versions of the archetypal heroes of the traditional Western and Spy genres most often associated with John Wayne and James Bond, which, as Osgerby and Gough-Yates explain, can be viewed as “lifestyle” programs in that they combine “fantasies of thrilling adventure with mythologies of affluence and consumption” (2001, 3).²⁸ These upper-class heroes reflect the consumer lust and aesthetic flamboyance of capital, gesturing towards the acceptability and desirability of hedonistic lifestyles. Indicating, through these superheroes, that such aspirations are both admirable and glamorous, such figures of “masculine consumption” are not unique to these contemporary superheroes; Osgerby reveals, for example, how the character of Simon Templar – “a daring swashbuckler whose flair for fisticuffs was complemented by a debonair sense of sartorial panache and

²⁸ There has been significant debate regarding the distinction between and blurring of ‘heroic’ genres. Coogan maintains that we know how to distinguish a superhero genre because of plot, setting, icon, theme, and character conventions, and while the superhero genre is distinguishable primarily through character, others such as the Western or the mystery are designated via other elements such as the setting or plot. Moreover, the superhero genre traditionally “animates and resolves” the basic cultural conflict of the male’s relationship to his larger community, “narrating the adventures of young men who learn to apply their strength to benefit their social group” (Coogan 2006, 24). These distinctions are useful in determining why, for example, even though James Bond has gadgets like Batman, John Wayne has swagger like Iron Man, and Rambo always wins and survives his battles just as Captain America does, that the former are members of the spy, western, and action genres respectively and not considered superheroes. However, my position follows from Hassler-Forest who argues that “genres should not be considered stable categories, nor can their boundaries be distinguished by analyzing single texts, or even large groups of similar texts” and are rather slippery distinctions (2012, 7). Genres are defined “through the complex process of interaction between constantly changing groups of interacting users” and as Hassler-Forest explains, “...is not so much a classificatory tool as it is a way of grouping diverse texts together, frequently in order to increase their commodity value” (Ibid.). As a flexible, physically malleable, and adaptable figure, it is unsurprising that the historically specific Hollywood superhero can incorporate, blend and blur traits and narrative formulas which incorporate multiple genres in order to attract the biggest audiences.

an impeccable taste for the finer things in life” (2001, 32) – lured audiences to the television series *The Saint* in the 1960s. The display of hedonistic leisure and conspicuous consumption combined with fast-paced adventure, led the way for the onslaught of imitators that followed. Most significant, Osberg argues, was the “new archetype of masculinity” that the show, through its articulation of cultural preoccupations of the time, popularized: “A form of masculine identity that embraced a credo of affluent pleasure, narcissistic style and personal ‘liberation’ through consumption” (Osberg 2001, 33).

This form of masculine identity predicated on commodity consumption, narcissism, “hedonism and conspicuous display” (Osberg 2001, 38-39), appears to be in many ways at odds with the more traditional constructions of manhood, the “puritan” form of masculine identity, as Hoch and Osgerby explain: “hard-working, hard fighting” and adhering to “a production ethic of duty before pleasure” (Osgerby 2001, 38; Hoch 1979, 118). This traditional construction of manhood has not disappeared and is very much present in most superhero narratives, often in the “extra-ordinary” alter ego of the “ordinary” superhero. The neoliberal playboy, for example, still retains his traditional “tough guy” masculinity through his physical appearance, his discourse, his actions, and through his “boisterous heterosexuality” and “playboy ethic” (Osberg 2001, 40). His use of the “biggest and baddest” weapons (something that will be discussed at length in the following chapter) also functions to reconcile any ambiguity of his “flawed” masculinity. Indeed, the hypermasculine sub-type remains present in this variety of updated forms in the superhero genre.

One of the post prevalent and popular contemporary superhero archetype in Hollywood, possibly a result of advancements in digital film technology such as CGI that have made realistic depictions possible, is the mutant, hybrid, or animal-human superhero. Hybrid superheroes are envisioned to possess the ability to overcome the limitations of human muscular-masculinity through augmented muscles and various “mutant” abilities that forge animal, cyborg, phantasmal, or even un-dead characteristics with the superhero subject. The desire to construct an unconquerable male warrior/hero with superhuman or un-human qualities is widespread in contemporary films and comics: *Ant-Man* 2015; *Blade* 1998; 2004; the *X-men* series 2000; 2006; 2009; 2011; 2014; *The Inhumans* 2017-present; the *Spiderman* series 2002; 2004; 2007; 2012; 2014; *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* 1990; 1993; 2014, and more. Analogies between the human and animal, human and inhuman have been invoked frequently in pop culture and in contemporary philosophy through theorizations of the body and its relationship to particular constructions of the subject.

The mutant body is complex, contradictory and dichotomous; valorized heroes in one sense yet simultaneously segregated or banished as exiles from the “human” world to live in seclusion in another. “Mutant musclemen” (Bukatman 2003, 48) have a greater potential for harm, and are often presented as uncontrollable, overly powerful, even evil. As Spoto explains, these are the heroes that allow us to act out fantasies of “dark desires, and potentialities within all of us” (1978, 161). Such “unbound” bodies of limitless imaginary potential also reflect a fascination with but also a desire to appropriate and control the super-human. Consider the mutants who, most famously in the *X-Men* series, were introduced as the embodiments of our fears of the other and also as the potential

dangers of the post-human. Often animal-human hybrids (for example Wolverine, Sabretooth, Beast), mutants tend to exhibit the dangerous qualities associated with animals and are thus objects of sacrifice, often being subjects of experimentation and torture; the implanting of adamantium onto Wolverines skeleton is one example (McWilliams 2009, 99). Body normality is a central theme in the construction of deviant, pathological, and monstrous bodies that are subjected to social regulation and disciplining (Fraser and Greco 2005, 18). In one sense, such bodies can represent a return to savage, indiscriminate violence as well as a celebration of the augmented body (often as a result of military technological experiments) and the power it embodies.

Whether or not the diversity in masculine subjectivities or the current popularity of “flawed” masculinity suggests that “masculinity is in crisis” is beside the point, for as Robinson argues, such a performative discourse simply functions to reproduce what it names (Robinson 2000, 10; Rehling 2009, 3). However, it may be useful to recognize, for example, the turn to the “ordinary” as an attempt to relate to the “average,” “unexceptional,” “unremarkable” viewer while functioning to “reassert white heterosexual male hegemony” (Rehling 2009, 1-2). That is, rather than re-assert the tough-guy muscular warrior of the 1980s, or “white phallic power” as Rehling contends, the ordinary hero is indicative of anxiety and uncertainty prevalent in a time of insecurity, and ultimately evidence of “white heterosexual masculinity’s continuous need of verification” (2009, 4).²⁹ Similarly, while our obsession with mutant-heroes is exemplary of our fear and desire of post-human embodiments, characters such as Wolverine, an out-

²⁹ This statement joins recent scholars who acknowledge the interconnections between race, gender and sexuality and how whiteness, masculinity and heterosexuality are articulated and defined both in relationship to each other as well as to their opposing identity categories (Rehling, 2009, p.4).

of-control primal, animalistic warrior – a gesture towards the Hobbesian state of nature, “untroubled by culture, civilization, or women” (Kirkham and Thumim 1993, 13) - retains the muscular, masculine, violent power of our society’s traditional warrior hero. That is, while perhaps an ambiguous character due to his mutant status, in superhero form the mutant reinforces the sexualisation of the “uncivilized” beast and a simultaneous reverence for his sheer strength.

Contradictions of masculinity exhibited through the characters explored above are inevitably reconciled by their imperative towards violence and vigilante justice and their ultimate heroic status; that is, the construction of manhood in the superhero universe remains rooted in justified militarized violence. While the very nature of mutable and physical malleable superheroes allows for the coexistence of multiple forms within the same body, the “tough guy” characterization that has been a staple of masculinity in popular culture perseveres in the dynamic superhero body. As we will see in the following section, this becomes reified but also undermined through extensions of the body, through the costumes and armour that cloak the superhero body, and through the body in pain and in action.

The Malleable Superhero Body as Site of Conflict

The superhero is a figure that represents and complicates theorizations of the body, masculinity, and war. One of the places politics is located is in the body. The body, explained Foucault, is a locus of political power, the site of reproduction, transmission, and transgression of power relations which “invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (Foucault 1977, 25). The idyllic warrior body is perhaps one of the most prescient figures of the body “in the grip of very

strict powers”, meticulously controlled, a composed image of strength, agility, valour, and courage recognizable in his posture, gaze, gait, build, and march (135-136).³⁰ The soldiers’ body is the embodiment of an imagined masculinity, constructed and disciplined by those in power for political and social motives. That the “body as weapon” is a central and repeatedly explored theme in the superhero genre speaks to its both significance in our socio-cultural values and recognition of the potential profitability of its aesthetic exploration and exploitation as a site of militarism.

The body, as has been explored by numerous feminists (Grosz 1994; Butler 1993; Haraway 1990; Bordo 2000) and other theorists, is a text through which meanings get inscribed and gain permanence through markers on the terrain of human flesh.

Theorisations of the body can reveal how corporeality and subjectivity are constituted through political, economic, and scientific discourses and the resulting implications of their representation. It is power, explains Gatens, that “takes hold of and constructs bodies in particular ways”, the body being both the target and vehicle of expression through discourse and practices (Gatens 1999, 230). While bodies contain the critical capacity to “exceed, escape, defy, or threaten social order” however, they are also sites of training and disciplining (Fraser and Greco 2005, 10).

Like other popular culture genres (including science fiction, horror, and fantasy) and mediums (cartoons, video games, toys), superhero bodies can be tough but penetrable, imposing but malleable, tiny but impenetrable, strong but uncontrollable, resilient but fallible. The various incarnations of popular superhero bodies reflect trends in constructions of masculinity, as discussed above, that reflect particular ideologies,

³⁰ While Foucault was describing the ideal figure of the soldier as seen from the early seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, the disciplined soldier body of today continues to reflect the image illustrated.

hopes and fears. One can experience bodies that are invulnerable to harm, bodies that are capable of impossible displays of athleticism and supernatural power, and bodies that do not age according to conventional standards of time. (Aaron, 2007, p. 346) The most significant facet of contemporary superhero bodies, and indeed the feature that permeates most Hollywood films, is the superhero body as one that is subject to wild configurations, manipulations and metamorphoses. The entanglement of aesthetics and militarized masculinity will be explored as it presents through modifications and extensions of the body, on their clothes/costume or armour, and through the body in action.

Contemporary films that utilize CGI technology have situated the morphing body – that is, not simply the body presented pre- and post- augmentation but the actual process of transformation – front and centre. A spectacular cinematic event, simultaneously celebrating developments in special effects and the mutability of identity, the morph scene is the essence of contemporary superhero films. Morphing (and “shape-shifting”, common in superheroes such as Plastic Man and Mr. Fantastic), promises a “liberation from space, time, flesh, and history” Bukatman contends, and yet, it is not ahistorical, unbounded or finite (2003, 156) typically reminiscent of witnessing torture. The morphing of Logan into Wolverine in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009) for example, at once connotes the multiplicity of contradictions in constructions of masculine identities in particular and the special enclosure of identity within and by markers of the body in general. These “hyperbolic, dual-identity bodies”, then, wholly embody the social anxieties and deep uncertainties regarding the body, identity, and as will be discussed later, (military) technology. Consider Grevin’s description of the

transformation of Anakin Skywalker's transformation in *Revenge of the Sith* (2005) from "beautiful, feminized Narcissistic male youth" to the "evil metallic man Darth Vader":

[T]he insertion of each new metal limb and rod into his battered flesh causes unbearable pain; his transformation into a new metallic life is a grotesque parody of birth, full of pitiable cries and loathsome imagery...the destruction of male beauty and its transformation into the wracked, agonized form of the masochist, howling in pain and despair. (Greven, 2009, p. 245)

Both the "metal limbs and rods" inserted into Anakin and the adamantium endoskeleton implanted into Wolverine of course build upon a rich history in cinema that explores the relationship between technology and the body. Characters in films such as *The Terminator* (1984; 1991; 2003; 2008; 2009) and *Robocop* (1987; 1990; 1993) have reflected and provoked anxieties around the cyborg/android body which is intimately bound up with capitalism, science (Fraser and Greco 2005, 23) and military experiments: signifying a remodelling the body into a weapon itself.

Fundamental to the morph scene is the depiction of utter pain and suffering – a masochistic and tortured encounter that serves several purposes. The purpose of morphing is to demonstrate the "toughness" of the character (claiming the warrior-hero label through bodily suffering, thus resolving any anxiety over the masculine status of the hero) while simultaneously creating an aesthetically powerful scene affecting audience emotions in ways that produce empathy, sympathy, anger, and sadness. It satisfies our desire to bear witness to the battle of multiple and malleable identities, between beast and man, between the id and the ego. It also serves as a body, a society, out of control: a monstrous birth, an ambiguous species existing outside of the norm, a symbol of the dangerous and uncontrollable (Bukatman 2003 48 -70) and thus, a warning of the potential consequences of the disruption of social hierarchy.

Such paradoxes embedded in the mutant superhero are aesthetic (re)productions that gesture towards theorizations by feminists who have called attention to constructions of manhood and politics that rely on human/inhuman dichotomies: denigration and denial of particular bodies and a fear of the feminine; glorification of other bodies as beautiful and linked to the quest for glory. For example, Wendy Brown (1988) articulates the Ancient Athenian relationship to the body which constructs women as less-than-human, existing in a space between man and beast, and men as attempting to simultaneously transcend the matter of his body in the relentless pursuit of immortality, glory, and domination. Moreover, the militaristic undertones that equate manly virtue and epic heroism with denial of the body and thus victory are emblematic of the contemporary neo-liberal militarized security order in which the ideal of a glorified male warrior is projected onto the behavior of states. By juxtaposing the un-human superhero in comics/film with constructions of manhood and politics that rely on paradoxical estimations of the body, we not only acquire a nuanced insight into what is required for the contemporary militarized security order, but also an appreciation for pop culture as both (re)productions and resistance to this order – as appropriations and also a strong site of critique and transformation.

In contrast to the spectacle of toughness and overt power exhibited on and through the hyper-muscular body, and the contradictions exhibited through the mutant boy, the very ordinary/human superhero body codes masculine ideals in its clothes, extensions, but also through its very “ordinariness”: an important part of the superhero identity, pre- or post- heroic transformation. This is significant because despite the attempt by filmmakers to appeal to an audience of average, flawed, troubled bodies, it

reinforces what Rehling argues, that all bodies are necessarily marked, even, and perhaps especially those of “ordinary” white men. It is therefore important to bring to light their very “ordinariness,” to reveal the whiteness and the maleness of the heroes, and challenge the “seeming neutrality and invisibility of the dominant identity” (2009, 5).

Just as with the human-hybrid superhero body discussed above, the morph scene of the ordinary boy/man to superhero is central here: the physical transformation represents the production of a resilient subject produced through the biopolitical disciplinarity of a militaristic society; through militarization resilience is manifested and a “superhero” is born. Consider the origin scene from *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) wherein the audience witnesses the transformation of Steve Rogers (a young man who, having been deemed unfit for military service agrees to undergo a military experiment to inject him with a ‘Super-soldier’ serum) into the iconic North American superhero Captain America:

The bony young boy, his gangly limbs hanging weakly and his complexion so pale it shined almost translucent in the fluorescent lights of the operating theatre, was suddenly grasped menacingly by the alien looking arms of the giant metal capsule, his round doe-ish eyes growing wider with fear as his frail form is completely encased in an industrial metallic vault, a futuristic and simultaneously medieval tomb of death, torture, and rebirth. His body has been willingly, bravely, sacrificially offered to those who wish to study it, use it, and refigure it for war. This is a body, a weapon, an experiment generated for America’s “freedom” and “security”. The boy, after all, wants to be the best soldier he can be. He wants to fight – and win. His country wants to win the war. Now his body is no longer his - was it ever? Menacing whirring noises, flying sparks, and finally a definitive metal clank that reverberates sinisterly around the cavernous room. The onlookers stare breathless in their white lab coats and goggles, in their suits and military uniforms, a deafening silence of anticipation, fear, doubt, excitement. Then, with a thunderous boom and blinding bursts of light and exploding flames, the thick metal walls of the capsule begin to slide apart. The enormous, glistening chiseled physique of an astoundingly beautiful naked man with discernable musculature and smooth, taut skin is revealed: an impossibly square jaw, broad shoulders, solid abdomen, and bulging muscles. The beautiful, almost homoerotic spectacle, save for the brief moment of an inquisitive, sexual touch of the man’s chest by the

sole woman in the audience who bore witness to this metamorphosis, is strangely exciting, pleasurable, horrific and satisfying at the same time. A birth by science, a reincarnation by man of a god, a scientific and military triumph. The transformation of a feeble, feminine young boy into the epitome of normative Western masculine perfection becomes, in this techno-military torture/re-birth, undeniably complete when, in response to enemy attack the audience witnesses this immaculate and powerful body leap into action. The young boys' transformation into a heroic soldier complete with his first act of justified violence.³¹

As re-created in my own words, this scene from Marvel Entertainment's highly successful blockbuster, *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), depicts the controlling and correcting operation upon Foucault's "body as object and target of power"(136) through the manipulation of masculinity for political/military/national goals and the simultaneous pathologization of the feminine: the hyper-masculine body of Captain America becomes both literally and figuratively a symbol of American national identity, a construction that operates through his physical body, on the pattern of the national flag emblazoned on his uniform, and as a result of the normative masculine militarized heroic narrative that produces and is a production of the superhero body. In contrast then, the characters which don't obtain their desired post-morph form of dutiful soldier-hero, or cannot be contained at the direction of the government/military/order in power, are typically hunted and, as we have discussed, dismembered and dissected for the sake of military research, a theme which is prevalent in films including *Wolverine* (2009-2017) and the *Hulk* (2003; 2008), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), and the *X-Men* (2000-2006) series.

The scene described above also illustrates the tendency in Hollywood to depict what Edwards describes as "masculinity as masochist spectacle" and requires the

³¹ The depiction of this scene is my own.

recognition of the intersection between masculinity, masochism and film.

Transformation or origin scenes are almost ubiquitous in the superhero genre and are often the key moment that designate the transition from human to superhuman, boy to man, inaction to action. Heroism here is portrayed through the construction of a masculinity that is as Edwards explains, “dependent upon suffering, endurance, and the spectacle of masochism for its resolution into happiness” (2008, 169). It is the increased appetite for witnessing the aesthetic spectacle of the endurance of torture and suffering while associating it with the audiences’ pleasure that suggests our association of the body as a threat and potential weapon. In *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009), US colonel Stryker recruits Logan and reinforces his skeletal system with the virtually indestructibly metal adamantium. Before the gripping torture scene in which Logan is submerged naked in the adamantium injection machine, Stryker threatens: “We’re gonna make you indestructible. But first, were gonna have to destroy you”. In the recent Marvel television series *Luke Cage* (2016), episodes 4 and 13 utilize familiar torture scenes when Luke is depicted suffering in a chemical bath as part of his superhero origin story. The intensely violent, torturous, and naked aesthetic typical of such scenes suggest that is not just then the “increasing sexualisation and commodification of the male body in cinema and popular culture” (158) that is of concern here, but the tendency of the commodification of torture and suffering of the heroic body.

The Neoprene Armored Cape

The importance of the aesthetic in the superhero Universe – bodies, how they are constructed to look, move, what they are dressed in, and most importantly who they are (and are not) supposed to represent are integral to their heroic identity. Superhero

masculinity can become further militarized, for example, through the extension of clothes/costumes, armour, movements and superpowers. The aesthetic representation of superhero corporeality has as much to do with their outer layer of clothing, masks, weaponry and vehicles of transportation as extensions of their body as it does with anatomy. Physical attire is politically performative in that it communicates narratives; costume is central to every hero's identity and how audiences connect with them and artists, directors, producers, costume designers, and others are all making deliberate choices in the design of a superhero's outward appearance in ways that can reproduce or challenge gendered politics.

Since the emergence of the comic in the 1930s as a distinct entertainment medium in American popular culture, the superhero wardrobe has been communicating narratives through a combination of text and sequential illustration that functions within an aesthetic vocabulary of coded symbolism; as an embodied practice, fashion succeeds in signifying industrial strength associated with the ideal hyper-muscular superhero body: the look of power, virility and prowess. (Karaminas 2006, p.7) The costume of a superhero then contributes to the philosophical, political, or cultural message embodied within the superhero's corporeality. As Karaminas explains, "...dress acts as a 'confessional' that offers evidence of the practices and ideals of a given time". So if the costume functions as a mode of communication with systems of meanings, it is significant that the popular superhero garments have changed significantly over time: superheroes from World War II and the Cold War era like Superman, Captain America, and Wonder Woman, among others, were essentially "wrapped in the flag", transformed into signs of America. In this kind of formulation, explains Karaminas "the image of the costumed superheroes

functions as a cultural articulation of nation and subsequently constructs a series of relations around state and citizen, then of state, then of citizen and Other” (2006, 9).

Today, superheroes are rarely so auspiciously draped in nationalistic zeal, rather a common theme of superhero dress is the appearance of “everyday” clothes, corresponding with the emergence of the average hero (of course, as discussed earlier, this ordinariness functions as a masquerade for their superpowers and abilities), reminiscent of the Clark Kent ‘disguise’, which Superman assumed. The modern superhero cloak of the “neoliberal playboy” is not, however, so “average” – the clothes are more often than not emblematic of the fashion of the super elite: stylish, sleek, and fitted communicating financial success, sexual expertise, and power. This is largely reflected in the uber-fashionable suits³² and impeccably manicured façade of characters such as Bruce Wayne and Charles Xavier, and the tuxedos donned by Tony Stark at his prestigious Stark Industries Expos. For example, Judiaanna Makovsky, the acclaimed costume designer for *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) explained her approach to dressing Stark’s character: ...any suit or jacket he wore would have to be just so elegant and well-tailored that you would immediately know it was extremely expensive and bespoke without screaming a fashion label” (Kucharski 2016). Such costumes, explains Holmlund, link masculinity with capitalist power –another masculine masquerade (1993, 222). Audiences are always at some point, however, inevitably delivered the traditional “hyper-spectacle of muscular masculinity” augmented by tight leather and spandex to highlight muscle definition. After all, “clothes can sexualize men just as they can

³² Of course, what we wear is largely determined by what is sold on the consumer market – that is, that fashion serves as a “vehicle for circulating patterns of consumption and ideology that are tied to the notions of the body and the self” (Karaminas 2006, 7). The dress of Hollywood heroes is not unconnected to the sales of consumer products in reality.

sexualize women” (Kirkham and Thumim 1993, 13) – a costume reminiscent of those of the action heroes who defined the genre, such as Stallone and for whom “muscles are costume enough” (ibid).

An almost universal costume for today’s superhero is a modern or futuristic version of the combat suit. Miller explains: “There is nothing more menacing than the image of a skilled warrior decked out head to toe in military gear...” (Miller 2006, 38). In his instructional book *Gung Ho! How to Draw Fantastic Military Comics*, Miller explains how every aspect of the character, including combat and dress uniforms, specialty accessories such as night vision goggles, helmets, belts, boots, etc. must be drawn accurately, referencing believable military equipment in order for the illustration to be convincing. Providing examples of how one might draw a character in the Air Force, the Army/National Guard, the Coast Guard, the Marines, the Navy, or Special Operations, Miller explains how attention to detail to the different combat duties and activities require different uniforms and conventional arms. Consider the description of one military superhero character’s equipment:

Granted, this guy is not wearing much in the way of regulation military apparel, but his awesome gun, a squad automatic weapon (SAW) is standard issue for combat units. The SAW, which uses the same type of rounds as the world famous M16A2, can be bi-pod mounted (the bipod can be seen at the bottom right of the machine gun) for optimal firing accuracy. It weighs over 15 pounds (7kg) with bipod and tools and can fire up to 725 rounds per minute. All in all, the SAW is a fitting weapon for this intricately decorated hardcore hombre. (Miller 2006, 38)

In fact specific attention is paid in the manual to the types of weapons and their capabilities, from flamethrowers to antiaircraft/antitank guns, to bazookas and submachine guns. Similarly, Kubert reveals the importance of reference to authentic military ‘gear’ in the creation of a superhero’s uniform as he takes us through the drawing of Sgt. Rock:

If Sgt. Rock was to be credible and believable to my reader audience, then I had to pay attention to details. How did helmets differ in different armies and different wars? Despite soldiers' uniforms being similar, how did they wear them in distinctive ways? What did their boots look like? What did soldiers wear in cold weather as opposed to summer heat and the tropics? (Kubert 1999, 21)

Superhero uniforms and equipment acquire a sort of fantastic realism in the shift to the medium of film: "A superhero costume, but based in reality and tactical clothing", explains Makovsky, describing Falcon's costume and jetpack design in *Civil War*, (Kucharski 2016) allowing all of our senses are engaged by the sounds, motion, and speed that film and CGI are able to convey.

The aesthetic of superheroes on film today typically more closely resemble a Special Ops soldier or a marine than the colourful spandex clad icons of the past. Batman's body armour, for example, in essence embodies the interdependence of military and consumer culture, emblematic of an exceedingly wealthy and powerful lifestyle in which military machinery is consumed as a luxury, a desirable toy (Toh 2009, 2). These images, explains Toh "envisage the soldier as a weapon, encouraging a fetish for hard bodies augmented by military hardware" (ibid). While such "armoured masculine subjectivities" may, as Thomas contends, be indicative of anxieties around the male body and "armoured" masculine representations, articulating a specifically masculine unease about a "technology of abjection" and a "feminizing mass culture" (Thomas 1999, 26), the centrality of play, desire and pleasure evoked in the reproduction of these images is predominant. The representation of "tools of war" as toys and the resultant pleasure that is derived from admiring Batman's body armour and watching his gadgets in action, explains Toh, "grants military hardware a consumer-friendly façade, further stoking

consumer desire for future developments of tools of war that may be consumed as toys” (Toh 2009, 1).³³

While this analysis demonstrates how there is a conjoined relationship between clothing and corporeality, particularly between soldiers and superheroes, where the uniform is often integral to the individual’s powers or capabilities in battle, it also makes visible how the warrior’s costume and equipment reinforces and embeds the militarized national virtues of patriotism and militarized violence on the superhero body. More importantly, the synthesis of military fetish, consumer desire, and belief in the acceptability of the ultimate reliance of force, argues Toh, together do not simply succeed in “feeding a taste for the tools and the toys of war” but ignite a desire to see them in action (Toh 2009, 1).

The everyday body then, becomes militarized through its stylistic presentation in the particular garments that cover up its very ordinariness. Of course, in many traditional superheroes this is the masked identity/alter ego. For the suave, wealthy superhero who signifies a shift from the “savage” muscular Rambo to a more refined hero, the cloak of military armour is critical to the alter ego identity which serves to reconcile this masculine ambiguity. Although masculinity may not be tied to muscularity in the human embodiment of these characters, it will almost always include militarized armour and the acquisition of weapons, realistic or fantastic. In this way, the masculinity of the superhero does not risk being compromised by a more “effeminate” human persona and the superheroes embodiments, which have shifted from conjuring explicit to implicit

³³ The “Internet Movie Firearms Database” (imfdb.org) which details at length the weapons (real and fantasy) that are used in every screen shot in every film is a perfect example of this.

violence, thus legitimize violent militarized forms of masculine behaviour, reifying it as natural but also enjoyable.

Typically, even with the “ordinary” superhero embodiment, the audience is eventually treated to the visual spectacle of both the surfacing of muscular definition and enlargement and the acquisition of military armour and weapons, during the transformation to superhero. In contrast to the training montage which became an iconic part of the 1980s era action movie and Kung-Fu movies, the superhero body gains his powers and strength almost instantaneously and usually through a feat of military technology, scientific “accident”, or biological “mishap”. Consider the origin scene portrayed earlier in this chapter of *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), where having been deemed unfit for military service as the ordinary Steve Rodgers, the protagonist instantaneously acquires a hyper-musculature thanks to military technology as well as access to the military’s arsenal of weaponry – a captivating and gratifying visual transformation from “puny military reject into beefcake supersoldier” (Rosenberg 2011, Feb 6). The bodily transformation, symbolic of the transition from boyhood to manhood, is presented directly as an outcome of military technology, and as a far superior technique to creating the ideal warrior body than the traditional disciplining of the body over time. Rather than a mastery over one’s own body, complete endowment of oneself to the superior faculties of military science and technology is presented as the ultimate sacrifice – the mark of a true hero. In the case of *Iron Man* (2008) and *Iron Man 2* (2010), the transformation and acquisition is a simultaneous process that occurs every time Tony Stark dons the suit, armour replicating exaggerated human musculature that becomes a metallic extension of his masculine identity. In *Batman Begins* (2005), the

bodily transformation is presented both in the scenes of Bruce Wayne's martial arts training in which his muscular body is on display as being sculpted into an effective weapon then cutting to dramatic scenes where we see the Batman armour being carefully and methodically developed. Wolverine, although born a mutant, is made into a deadly weapon by the military's appropriation then penetration of his body for experimentation, transformed instantaneously from a mutant into a superhero. Spiderman's transformation from ordinary young alter ego Peter Parker is similarly instantaneous, a post-human warrior masculinity birthed literally overnight.

The Body (Filmed) in Action

Although I have focused primarily on the superhero body and his clothes/armour as a site through which militarized masculinities are variously signaled, this cannot be divorced from the action the body is directed to perform. Kirkham and Thumim explain how action refers to various manifestations of the physical, and for filmic depictions of the male is a recurrent site for violence, aggression, training, acquisition of skill and endurance for action, and competition. Thus, as the militarized masculine bodies conjured up by Hollywood appear diverse and the different typologies identified is not insignificant, what remains constant in these narratives is always the male body in action, employing physical violence: "To be tough, we must not only believe that it is un-masculine to display emotion, but that we must also rely on violence in order to solve any of our conflicts" (Neibaur 1995, 213). It is no shocking revelation that superheroes are always fighting – "whether for truth and justice", exclaims Bukatman "or because it's what they do – and they're the best at what they do – or because it beats working" (2003, 48). It is not simply that superheroes fight to "beat the bad guys," but rather the regularity

with which violence generally and militarized violence specifically is employed to do so, something that has not simply become a seemingly natural part of the superhero character and narrative but the pivotal, expected, and most glorified aspect of these films.

That superhero films typically conclude with a spectacularly violent battle, something that is not, of course, specific to the superhero genre but rather part of the Hollywood blockbuster formula, is as we have seen in Chapter 2, exemplary of the continued reliance on traditional understandings of security as well as an ideal space to display hyper-masculine physicality in action through violence and aesthetically stunning use of weaponry. Momentarily, violence can displace any ambiguity or anxiety produced by the spectacle of the male body on display (Holmlund 1993, 222) and once again links masculinity to power, violence, and militarization. Both the origins and the motivations for violence in these films are not insignificant, and suggest that a more nuanced analysis that moves beyond the corporeality of superheroes is required. Such typically hi-tech combat sequences, explains Moody, “marshal emotions around the excitement of dramatic action while mobilizing the patriotic sentiment that often emerges during times of war or national crisis” (Moody 2001, 71; Kellner 1990, 138).

The major themes invoked by the superhero body in action remain very close to those of classical mythology, “the story of how war and the quest for virtue transforms boys into men” (Grandstaff 2004); a rite of passage accessible only to heterosexual males through which he can then seek glory, recognition, and become a heroic warrior. The male epic, explain Kirkham and Thumim, equates strength with masculinity and physical strength with moral strength, depicts a solitary male against the world, relates violent action to codes of honour, and requires training and a “rite of passage” into manhood.

The rite of passage can involve internal struggle and/or physical trials, competitions, and challenges, many of which, such as Stallone's training montage in *Rocky* (1976) have become iconic in popular culture. This narrative is typically displayed through origin scenes and physically demanding training sequences recognizable in numerous superhero films including *Spider-Man* (2002), *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009), and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011).

Masculinity as patriotic duty, the idea that one's son would "become a man" by joining the military, has prevailed throughout much of American history and the spectacle whereby "young male bodies are turned into fighting machines" is ever-present in superhero narratives with deliberately suspenseful and exhilarating sequences that depict the process with a knowing dramatic irony that hooks the audience with a successful cinematic formula. That the heroic mythos and formation of masculine militarized identity remain strikingly similar and historically unremarkable suggests that hero myth is intimately tied to military ethos through the representation of the masculine superhero body and the body in action. In most superhero films, the body is made even more spectacular by special effects, an ode to the technology which enables the CGI scenes as well as the fictional technology that aides our superhero. This technique of showcasing technology is often accompanied by sublimity and exuberance, explains Bukatman, at traversing normative space and time and transcending the limitations of the human body (Bukatman, 2003, 2-3). The body becomes "unbound", a flexible and malleable but disciplined warrior/soldiers body.

The construction of the multiple and shifting masculine militarized bodies depicted in our pop culture icons needs to be recognized as "an amazingly durable and

flexible strategy of social control” (Bordo 1997, 91). As Bordo argues, following from Foucault, this power is embedded in the network of institutions, technologies, and practices that are constitutive and sustain positions of dominance and subordination. Foucault warned that a new and unparalleled discipline had emerged that was directed against the body, the aim of which – tied to the modern forms of the army – were to increase its utility and power (Bartsky 1997, 129-30): Biopower was indispensable to capitalism as it made possible a “controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production” and to patriarchal power through the regulation of women’s bodies for reproduction (Sawicki 1999, 191).

If, as Gatens argues, the body is constructed by discourses and practices that both target the body and use it as a “vehicle of expression” (Gatens 1999, 230), then the representation of militarized bodies celebrated in popular culture is constitutive of the transforming soldier body. This is visible in the adornment of these bodies with hi-tech real and futuristic armour, their fusion with military technology, and the actions these bodies are created to take in the form of physical, though typically justified, violence. Moreover, as Ling and Agathangelou explain, a masculine militarized identity relies upon dichotomies that reinforce neoliberal logics and draw upon “colonial identities of Self vs. Other, patriotism vs. treason, hunter vs. prey, and masculinity vs. femininity” (2004, 517). It is these very logics that get reproduced and disseminated through the valorisation of hyper-masculinised militarism and representations of “warrior- princes” (Whitworth 2004, 104); warrior-hero mythology is integrally connected to the construction of particular bodies as sites of power and others as bodies to be controlled.

Thus today we are seeing popular culture embedded in a form of biopower which is indispensable for militarization and war – through our everyday, banal interaction with the established norm of the desirable supersoldier who glorifies the use of violence and force - the militarized superhero body. The ordinary everyday superheroes that implicitly and/or explicitly embody militarized violence through the mechanisms discussed above (body armour, action, weapons, special effects, a recurrent tendency towards vigilante and indiscriminate violence) symbolizes the blurring/ collapsing of boundaries between civilian and soldier. This disintegration reflects the deliberate border crossing performed one month after the attack on the World Trade Centre Towers on September 11 2001, in which the whole of American citizenry were, as Orr argues, inducted into the ranks of military combatants: “Every American” proclaimed George W. Bush “is a soldier now” (Orr 2004, 452, quoted in *The New York Times*, 30 October 2001, p. B5) Thus, the heroic soldier image is maintained in and through a refined masculinity in the modern day superhero.

It is not insignificant that the popularity of superhero narratives have historically surged during times of social crises (Ndalianis 2007, 4), and the current barrage of superhero characters and narratives in popular culture and the alteration in masculine representations can be read as a reflection of societal transitions. That our expectations of masculinity have shifted but can still align with a military ethos reveals an adaptive capability of militarized ideologies within dynamic societies. To suggest that militarized masculinities are endemic, whether implicit or explicit, is not however, to affirm that it is natural or necessary, rather, it denotes an imperative to maintain and reproduce a warrior-hero responsive to shifts in society in order to maintain relevancy. Such a deduction is

logical, considering studies by scholars such as Hale who have concluded “the military reframes masculinities as a means of meeting the aims of the process of militarization” (Hale 2011).

The Complex, Subversive Superhero Body...with Boobs?

There remains a majority culture in comic books, and it is white and male. And it often doesn't know what to do with anyone else. (Zimmerman 2004, 69)

If the superhero body is, as Taylor argues, malleable, a cultural product “beyond limits-perhaps without limits”, a post-human unbound subject, then the Superhero is a figure that has the potential to “defy all traditional and normalized readings” (Aaron 2007, 346), to subvert its own violent subjectivity. Herein lies the subversive potential of the superhero body specifically - to redefine its subjectivity from that of a “hyper-masculine militarized god” and undermine the culturally enforced normativity of the ideal soldier’s body as heroic; as a body in action capable of providing “security” while reproducing *insecurity* through their armoured body in action. An unstable corporeal identity suggests that reconfigurations are possible – heroes can embody transgression and employ strategies of resistance. *The Incredibles* (2004), for example, modifies the famous bodies of DC Comics superheroes and expands the range of “acceptable” bodies, revealing aged, overweight, and “less than beautiful” bodies, subverting the notion of super-body ideals. The popularity of the awkward tweens of *Kick-Ass* (2010; 2013), the ill-mannered alcoholic bum-hero depicted in *Hancock* (2008), the bitter, aged, and beaten superheroes of *The Watchmen* (2009), and the hilariously mundane but nonetheless heroic antics of the members of *The Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) indicates an affinity for contravening bodies and unconventional heroic identities. And while, as Lendrum argues, there are few substantive alternatives to the dominant models of superhero

masculinity, their mere presence will contribute to challenging the dominant “ownership” of a cultural icon (Lendrum 2005, 287).

This chapter has necessarily concentrated on male superheroes, primarily as a result of their almost wholly encompassing presence in the superhero universe whereby to include what small minority of superheroines do exist might suggest that they are significantly represented in the world of superheroes. Nonetheless, new and reincarnated female superheroes may be the site for the greatest potential of subversive creations. Female characters, as has been discussed briefly in Chapter 2, are typically represented by the same tropes we are familiar with in Hollywood film generally: the girlfriend/wife/mother; the victim in need of being protected and/or saved by the male hero, and; the evil villain, typically ethnically (as well as sexually) “othered.” Up until 2017, of the dozens of superhero movies released by Marvel and DC in the past decade the only women superheroes to appear in blockbuster successes have been as members of a team (for example as members of *The Avengers* or the *X-Men* which, of course are not ironically called the *X-Men*). When female superheroes do appear on the big screen, their physical appearance is, unsurprisingly, typical of the traditional Hollywood “action chick”: they have “buns of steel”, killer curves, and just enough muscle to land a powerful kick to the head of their attacker while covered in tight or barely there spandex to ensure we can ogle the curve of their butt as they do so. Several commentators have captured the “new generation” of sexy-violent heroines perfectly:

Ladies, get out your boxing gloves and bustiers. This year’s heroines of prime time and the big screen are muscular and trained in the martial arts, and they have no compunctions about slapping, immolating, and kicking their way through life...They are restoring world order and ending bad dates with swift, punishing blows. (Steinhauer 2000, 5)

The petite actress Zhang Ziyi in Ang Lee's new movie "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" slays several men twice her size while drinking a cup of tea. In "Charlie's Angels," Drew Barrymore manages to pulverize her captors with her feet bound to a chair. And then there's "The Matrix's" Carrie-Anne Moss, who, even in a skintight body-suit, manages to flip her enemy like a flimsy omelet. Across the country female moviegoers no longer dream of being saved by Jean-Claude Van Damme but of kicking and chopping the bad guys till they cry for mercy. (Ali 2000, 76)

Ali's comment highlights the astute maneuver the film industry is making with such characters: they are tapping into both the male and female demographic by producing protagonists that women want to emulate and men find sexy; audience members of both sexes, it seems, "could connect powerfully to the image of a...heroine getting sweaty and bloody in brutal physical combat with a monster" (Jones 2002, 150). Numerous cultural critics and feminist scholars have considered the veritable onslaught of "tough women, albeit beautiful, slender, heterosexually desirable ones" (Inness 2004, 3) that dominated the movie and television screens in the form of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Xena: The Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), *La Femme Nikita* (1997-2001), *Tank Girl* (1995), *Alias* (2001-2006), *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), among others. While the mere appearance of an increasing number of women in leading roles in film as well as their "tough girl" character has been praised by many second wave feminists as an overall improvement for the representation of women in the industry, others have been more skeptical, questioning the perpetuation of disturbing stereotypes through these female heroines.

The standard heroine is, for instance, almost always white (whereas the "villainess" typically is representative of an ethnic community that has historically been at war with America, such as Chinese, Japanese or German) and heterosexual. She is powerful but not *too* powerful ("When a woman that is too powerful and tough appears in

the American imagination,” explains Inness “her life is invariably cut short, reminding the audience of the threat posed by such women” (2004, 11)), muscular but not *too* muscular, and definitely not as tough as the males around her. “The stereotypical female heroine”, Inness describes, “can be muscular but not so much so that she presents a threat to the males with whom she stars. Her muscularity might be impressive “for a girl,” but she is no challenge for the boys” (12). The action heroine “can be tough and aggressive” Inness clarifies, “but not enough to make men nervous, since they might question their own masculinity if she were too tough” (13). Her femininity ensures that she has the potential to be child-bearing, but is never pregnant and is typically childless (if she does her “toughness” is simply a manifestation of maternal instincts to protect the child explains Inness).

Ultimately, “tough women are still expected to be feminine, attractive, and heterosexually appealing” (14). The most common critique of these superheroines thus typically focuses on the heroines’ sexual aesthetic as being designed to appeal to male fantasies – she exists primarily for the male gaze and our *viewing* pleasure: “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 2001, 346). Indeed, in the comic universe of superheroes and superheroines, the aesthetic of women’s bodies is almost universally recognized as one of overtly sexualized characterizations achieved through disproportionate and unrealistic body parts, tight, revealing, and/or very little costumes, and hyper-feminized traits complemented by defined musculature only in areas that do not detract from the characters femininity (muscular but also sexually desirable). The

way in which characters are positioned and framed and the way in which drawings scale female bodies in comparison to the male characters in comics and stage female bodies in film are all techniques utilized in what has become a stylistically formalized style of infantilization, sexualisation, and eroticization of the female “heroic” body. Consider, for example, that in an instructional book describing how to draw military comics, the terminology used for female drawings always include sexualized labels such as “femme fatale”, “sexy spy”, “hourglass shape”, “all curves and attitude” and are typically cloaked in “skin-tight body armour” and a “one-piece body suit that fits the wearer like a glove” (Miller 2006, 25; 45; 76) She can fight wars but she just must looks sexually appealing while doing it.³⁴ The reincarnations of comic book superheroines in Hollywood have reproduced this aesthetic. Consider, for example, the critique by blogger “Boobs”, of some of the promotional images released by Marvel advertising the highly anticipated film *The Avengers* (2011) and the inclusion of a female character, the Black Widow:

Here is some promotional art from the box office record-breaker, Marvel’s *The Avengers*. Just have a look at it. Looks pretty good...but wait, what’s Black Widow up to? Could she be representing and empowering women by being a strong female fighting alongside the men, saving the world? Perhaps, but right now she seems to have positioned herself juuuust right to let you, dear viewer, see both her humps and her lovely lady lumps. (Boobs, 2013)

Indeed, as the trailers promise, Black Widow, while depicted as intelligent and skilled fighter, is also always sexually suggestive, physically striking, and an erotic addition to the superhero team.³⁵

³⁴ Lara Croft’s character in *Tomb Raider* (2001) is an excellent example of this.

³⁵ They are also very rarely important characters in and of themselves: “What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance” (Mulvey 2001, 347).

As discussed above, it is not only the physical shape of the superhero body and the costume and/or armour that adorns it that is essential to the aesthetic of the contemporary Hollywood superhero, but also the kinesthetic movements of the body in action that is a vital part of the visualisation of violence. The female hero's body in action is notably different from that of the male superhero: powerful blows and impressive fighting skills are always in correspondence with sexualized movements and postures that remind us at all times of her femininity; rather than showcasing brute strength or technical expertise with weapons, the female character typically exhibits proficiency in gymnastics, martial arts, and other movements which provide opportunities to showcase her lithe, sexy body. These images are conveyed to the audience through the lens of the camera which, through the use of angles, height, shading, as well as speeding up or slowing down sequences, is able to project the desired image of the filmmakers. The torture/fight scene of Natasha Ramanov/Black Widow in *The Avengers* (2011) described above depicts such a scene: the superheroine ultimately out-wits and over-powers her captors with incredible fighting skills and speed, but does so in a low-cut and form-fitting dress. The sexy female heroic body is also typically utilized as a tactic in her arsenal of weapons, to seduce, shock, or distract the enemy, and it is just as often her weakness, targeted for sexual violence or sexual torture.

The nearly pornographic depiction of female superhero characters through the representation of their bodies, their bodies in action, and the framing/filming techniques of their bodies in both film and comic books has, as evidenced from the discussion above, been addressed by feminists and cultural critics since the first depiction of Wonder

Woman.³⁶ Attempts at active subversion have begun to take aim at these sexist depictions, making full use of the far reach and massive potential of the internet. One of the most interesting examples is The Hawkeye Initiative (THI), a project driven by the self-proclaimed mandate "How to fix every Strong Female Character pose in superhero comics: replace the character with Hawkeye doing the same thing." Created on December 2nd 2012, THI became a means to keep track of the subversive artwork being created and posted on social media and the Internet; using Hawkeye (Clint Barton, a Marvel superhero character and member of *The Avengers* discussed in Chapter 2 is recognized for skilled marksman-ship and his stoic strength and toughness) and other male comic book characters, the posts "illustrate how deformed, hyper-sexualized, and impossibly contorted women are commonly illustrated in comics, books, and video games" (The Hawkeye Initiative, 2015). Tumblr user Glitchy proposes the Hawkeye Test for film makers and comic book artists: "If your female character can be replaced by Hawkeye in the same pose without looking silly or stupid, then it's acceptable and probably non-sexist. If you can't, then just forget about it" (Ibid). The result is some hilarious but provocative images that blatantly reveal and subvert the sexism prevalent in the comic world. For instance, returning to the example of Black Widow, the artist Kevin Bolk describes the motivation behind his parody of The Avengers, "The Avengers Booty Assemble": "I couldn't help but notice that in most of the ad material, the guys are all in heroic stances but Black Widow is almost always in an impractical, curved-spine "booty

³⁶ As many of these critics have argued, the proportionally small number of female filmmakers and producers in Hollywood and the marginalization of their contributions is a significant part of the problem of both limited roles for women and the sexist typecasting that is so prevalent.

shot” pose. Figured I’d flip it around for my lady friends out there. Seemed only fair.” (Boobs 2013).

There is potential that female characters will be introduced in ways that challenge the norm: the reincarnation of *Wonder Woman* by Brian Azzarello and Chris Chiang, for instance, has been praised for its departure from previous incarnations of Wonder Woman in the comics by focusing on her strength as a warrior rather than highly-sexual depictions. In Chiang’s words: “She’s very confident, and while she’s not necessarily flamboyant, she’s very striking. She’s an Amazon warrior, and when she walks in a room, all eyes go to her. She handles herself like royalty, she’s very confident, and very powerful. And someone like that tends to be quieter than you’d expect.” (Reed 2014) The reboot has been praised for depicting Wonder Woman as a feminist icon, her physical body depicted in positions of action, strength, bravery and power. The 2017 release of *Wonder Woman* by DC Comics has modelled this version of Azzarello and Chiang’s caricature to both praise and criticism, with comments ranging from “unremarkable” to “a masterpiece of subversive feminism” (Williams 2017). This iteration of Wonder Woman was previously introduced to audiences at the end of the trailer for *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) where she is seen as saving both Batman and Superman from Doomsday, appearing strong (not overtly sexy) and represented as above the in-fighting that plagues the two main characters throughout the entirety of the film. Directed by Patty Jenkins and starring Gal Gadot, the film is the first female directed (without a male co-director) female lead superhero movie to surpass US\$400 million domestic and US\$800 million worldwide – this makes the film Warner Bros./Time Warner Inc.’s third-biggest domestic grosser ever (Mendelson 2017).

There are undoubtedly feminist elements of the film: “Wonder Woman’s casual rebuttal of a sexual advance”, “her dress-up montage (“it’s itchy”, “I can’t fight in this”, “it’s choking me”)”, and the deliberate referencing to the sexual objectification of women in film are, explains Williams, decidedly feminist acts. Her style of fighting even, with lots of lassoing and “hurling” rather than punching is reminiscent of the way Jennifer Lawrence fights in *The Hunger Games* (2012) “so outrageously adroit and natural that she makes it look as though women have been doing it all along, and men are only learning” (Williams). Unfortunately, elements of Hollywood’s formulaic approach remain intact:

Wonder Woman is a half-god, half-mortal super-creature; she is without peer even in superhero leagues. And yet, when she arrives in London to put a stop to the war to end all wars, she instinctively obeys a handsome meathead who has no skills apart from moderate decisiveness and pretty eyes. This is a patriarchal figment. Then, naturally, you begin to wonder why does she have to fight in knickers that look like a fancy letterbox made of leather? Does her appearance and its effect on the men around her really have to play such a big part in all her fight scenes? Even my son lodged a feminist critique: if she were half god, he said, she would have recognised the god Ares immediately – unless he were a better god than her (being a male god). (Williams 2017)

This most recent iteration of Wonder Woman exemplifies how characters and storylines are dynamic: always morphing, always developing, and always changing, and while there may not be drastic shifts in narrative or genre, contradictions may become more visible.

It is also possible that change will occur as traditionally male characters are re-created as women. An unanticipated announcement by Marvel Productions in the summer of 2014 recently surprised fans and the movie and comic industries in general when they announced that in the next Thor series the main character will be a woman. Jason Aaron the series writer explained: “This is not She-Thor. This is not Lady Thor. This is not Thorita. This is THOR. This is the THOR of the Marvel Universe. But it’s unlike any

Thor we've ever seen before" (Marvel Proudly Presents Thor, 2014). Thor represents the 8th title in the Marvel Universe in which the lead character is a woman, and can be seen as an attempt by Marvel to capitalize on a growing female fan base. The role of the reader as active participants in the construction of super-bodies and identities (being very carefully considered by the industry to ensure success) can literally drive the direction of future incarnations. While the online response to Thor's gender switch was fairly mixed, considering that white middle class adolescent males make up 91.5% of the superhero audience (Aaron 2007, 346) it is likely that such gender swapping as well as the creation of new female characters will remain on the margins and that undermining the hyper-masculine militarized machismo of superhero bodies in a political culture that defines the neoliberal subject against difference, may be just fantasy; Blockbuster releases announced for 2016 to 2018 included over 10 big budget superhero films, only one of which headlined a woman as her own featured character, Wonder Woman (2017).

Is there, then, anything unique or subversive about these female heroines, or are they, in spite of multiple variations of toughness and various attempts to eschew gender stereotypes, simply enacting militarized masculinity? As Judith Halberstam has suggested, there may be useful and feminist potential that opens up for women when viewing violent heroines (Tung 2004, 103). In Charlene Tung's study in which she analysed the various responses from female students who had viewed violent heroines in action, typical responses included feelings of empowerment and the desire to learn particular moves. One student responded "I don't really see it as violence...I would watch these even if they weren't [protecting] themselves. I like their...power", suggesting that there is viewing pleasure in powerful, physically and verbally aggressive

heroines. Tung explores here the possibility of focusing on fighting skills and the self-empowerment of the female character as opposed to the physical violence (Tung 102-3). More often than not, however, the toughness of the muscular-militarized heroines depicted in popular culture exist within the narrative to ensure their own survival in a male dominated world and to defend themselves or the status quo; their subjectivity is constructed as vulnerable subjects requiring protection and necessitating (self) defense. Women's bodies have always been a symbolic and functional site of struggle – a political text, a threat, and a weapon - and the female superhero is representative of such complexities. An analysis of female superheroes can help reveal the limits of heroism and heroic discourses and how heroism and security are tied up with muscular strength, militarized power, and physical violence. Azzarello and Chiang's Wonder Woman is, for instance, ultimately supposed to represent the "God of War". Wonder Woman demonstrates that "victim" and "protector" are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories but, similar to Shepherd's analysis of the identity categories of "terrorist" and "freedom fighter", "are deployed to constitute and delimit the fluid and mutable boundaries of political authority and corollary claims to legitimate use of force used against, and perpetrated by, gendered subjects" (2012, 15).

Within the superhero universe in comics and film/television, there has been an emergence of what one might consider revolutionary, subversive and transgressive superheroines: consider Qahera's *Burqa Avenger* in which the highly honed senses of Burqa Avenger (who is a teacher) are used to fight for the education of girls and the less powerful, and television shows such as *Super-Girl* or *Serenity*³⁷ which are challenging

³⁷ In *Serenity*, River Song, while vulnerable in appearance and in her mental stability, was also a threat to the powers that be both through her superhero assassin skills (which were also highly gendered, as her

the notion of what a heroine means and who the hero is. A progressive (in terms of its feminist storylines and character developments) and subversive superheroine debuted on November 20, 2015 in the form of the Netflix series *Marvels' Jessica Jones* (2015). The series shares continuity with the Marvel superhero film franchise and received critical acclaim for both its noir aesthetic as well as its development of the female protagonist and its approach to topics such as abuse, rape, and PTSD. Jessica Jones is not only a complex female character whose “costume” is jeans and a hoodie and whose brooding attitude and alcoholism stems from a devastating childhood incident, she is also an independent and extremely intelligent woman with her own business as a private investigator.³⁸ The character challenges almost all female superhero conventions, which, may not be so unconventional but actually revive a forgotten and/or concealed history of resilient, self-determining female characters. A series of blog posts by Saladin Ahmed titled "Buried Badasses: the Forgotten Heroines of Pre-code Comics" reminds us of a forgotten history of strong and non-traditional female characters in comics during the 1930s through to the early 1950s displaying “fascinating transgressions against sexism, and a reminder that comics have not ‘always been’ sexist in the same ways they are now”. These “rough-and-tumble super-women living independent lives” include:

KITTY KELLY, who goes from demure social worker... ..to a cleaver-wielding brawler. LADY SATAN, a master (not ‘mistress,’ note!) of black magic. Lady Satan wanders about in her stylish automobile, rescuing people (including sometimes clueless men) from monsters. And THE VEILED AVENGER. A

fighting style was half-ballet and half-utter destruction) and also the knowledge she had about secret government programs which would completely destroy the structures of power should that information become public knowledge.

³⁸ *Jessica Jones* character contains many similarities to Lisbeth Salander, the brilliant, troubled, and transgressive investigator/hacker from the 2011 film *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, based on the same novel.

vigilante more bloodthirsty than Batman, her whip forces men to die by their own hand. (Saladin)

According to Ahmed these characters start disappearing as soldiers begin returning home from WWII and women are pushed out of the workplace and back into their homes; by the time the Comics Code Authority is introduced in 1954 these characters had all but vanished.

The recent announcement of an all-female Marvel Avengers comic book series *A-Force* featuring She-Hulk, Captain Marvel, Wasp, Storm, Jean Grey, Spider-Woman, Rogue, and the Scarlett Witch as its main characters and the recent announcement that Marvels' new series *Thor* will feature a female as the superhero/Norse God indicates that there is a recognition of the desire among readers for female, albeit violent, representation in the comic world and thus recognition of potential profits among publishers.³⁹ Another cinema heroine that deserves mention as embodying a transgressive superheroine in Hollywood is the depiction of Imperator Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), whose body, motives, and actions are a feminist representation of a heroine saviour figure whose violence is a tool born from utter desperation (in search of her homeland and the freedom of female prisoners) rather than any vindictive motive or vigilante vengeance. Within Hollywood's superhero universe however, not only do the solo-title films remain almost entirely dominated by male characters, shifts in the representation of female heroines appears slow and peripheral, failing to subvert stereotypical sexualized characterisations for women while remaining destined to adopt our entrenched association of heroism with physical strength and/or violent action and

³⁹ Female comic book readership has been widely acknowledged as steadily rising and estimates suggest that females make up around 43 percent of the market.

thus reproducing the very paradoxes that mainstream superheroes embody. Consider, for instance, “the ultra-violence” of 11-year-old Mindy, or “Hit Girl” featured in *Kick-Ass* (2010), a superhero-assassin who challenges the sexualisation stereotype of the typical superheroine simply because she is a child while her extreme use of violence and skilled use of weapons maintains the standard superhero characterization.⁴⁰ In *Kick-Ass 2* (2013), the now teenaged Hit-Girl, who practises a disturbing viciousness when fighting, maintains a sexist dialogue though the film seems to be attempting to disrupt them. During the necessary training montage that features Mindy training her friend (and “Kick-Ass” Dave, Mindy deadpans “act like a bitch, get slapped like a bitch.” Towards the end of the film during a final bone-crushing battle with Mother Russia who gets impaled by thousands of shards of glass, Hit-Girl snidely remarks “I would’ve thought a cunt like you could handle all those pricks”. (2013)

Shifts in the way audiences want to see superheroes represented are unquestionably altering the Hollywood movie, however sluggishly. The maintenance of the dominant archetypes of masculinity explored throughout this chapter revolve around notions of manhood, warriors, and violence that appear to be almost universal in Hollywood, despite evidence of the popularity among readers and audiences for alternative moral and physical representations of “super-heroic” bodies and actions. Until our social, political and cultural imaginations transform the way we envision what/who a hero is and what/whom they are protecting, both the hero and the heroine will remain similarly bound within limited and violent possibilities. By exploring the link between

⁴⁰ The double standard that exists regarding the use of violence by women and children is nonetheless revealing here when following the films’ release, critics like Robert Ebert claimed it was “morally reprehensible” – similar levels of violence by male characters is rarely open to critique in action or superhero films anymore. (DiPaolo 2011, 6)

politics, popular culture and militarization and engaging in the relationship between masculinity, bodies, and militarized violence that repeatedly gets produced and consumed through the big screen, this chapter has revealed the entanglements of the celebration of particular bodies and their “heroic” actions and status. Who and how a “hero” is depicted is intimately tied to who counts as human in politics and popular culture, and as we will see in the following chapter, Hollywood’s representations of heroic violence are increasingly dominated by portrayals of human superheroes who are part machine – the production of which creates problematic entanglements between military technology, heroism, and war which, as discussed in Chapter 3, is in part the result of Hollywood’s relationship with the military that celebrates and benefits from this technology.

Chapter Six: “Super”men and the Military Machine: The New Militarized Techno-Soldier

From the battle front to the home front, we’re building a world where science fiction becomes science reality. (Quote from promotional video for Revision Military’s Kinetic Operations Suit)

In the concluding battle scene of *Iron Man 3* (2013), Tony Stark/Iron Man summons his fleet of armoured suits, remotely controlled by his artificial intelligence system J.A.R.V.I.S., to assist in a deadly and dramatic air assault on his enemies. The strikingly beautiful yet terrifying image of a massive floating army of weaponized drones (built as a consequence of Tony Stark’s unrealistically productive form of PTSD), enhanced by CGI transforms into a now familiar orchestrated fighting sequence involving futuristic weapons, technology, special effects and violence. This, like many other Hollywood battle scenes utilizes a formulaic combination of production techniques, genre awareness, and a knowledge of the audience’s curiousness, association to, fear, and wonder of the military and futuristic technology to provoke excitement, pleasure and distress at contemporary superhero violence.

What is the representational power of the image when fictional violence is tied to actual weapons? In the scene depicted above, the audience has witnessed the culmination of the progress Tony has made in the development of his high-tech armoured suits since his creation of the original Mark I prototype during imprisonment in Afghanistan (*Iron Man* 2008). This technological evolution over the span of the three *Iron Man* films (2008, 2010, 2013) and *The Avengers* series (2012, 2015, 2016), uncannily resembles the concurrent advancements in robotic technology, unmanned aerial vehicles and artificial intelligence and their increased deployment and use in reality: in the first two months of operation in Afghanistan after 9/11, Predator drones (or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles) armed with Hellfire missiles laser-designated some 525 targets, and within the first year

the fleet in operation destroyed 115 targets (Singer 2009, 34-7). The number of Predators in the fleet grew dramatically from less than 10 in 2001 to 180 in 2007. Combined with other drone subtypes in operation and production such as the Global Hawk, by 2008 there were 5,331 drones in the US military (almost twice the number of manned planes) and by 2015, the US military had 11,000 UAV's in inventory (Connor 2018). As one air force lieutenant general predicted, "given the growth trends, it is not unreasonable to postulate future conflicts involving tens of thousands" (Singer 2009, 34-7). Indeed,

When US forces entered Iraq in 2004, there was not a trace of robotic systems on the ground; by 2006 the swiftly surging number had risen to 5,000 with estimations reaching 12, 000 in the following two years with 22 different systems in operation: "The Army of the Grand Robotic is taking place," noted one retired army officer (quoted in Singer 2009, 32). In 2014, US President Barack Obama casually joked at a press conference "we are building Iron Man". The "Iron Man" Obama gestures to is the very real Tactical Assault Light Operator Suit (TALOS), a robotic "powered, armored exoskeleton" designed for use by special operations forces that has been in development through the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) (Gallagher 2016). The latest effort by the US military to create "smart-soldier" armoured technology, TALOS is slated to begin testing by summer 2018 with funding towards development estimated at 80 million dollars.

When the superheroes of the Golden Age such as Captain America were recruited to fight Americas wars, they typically were powered by their superhuman strength, agility, courage, and training. Sometimes their skills and powers were abetted by otherworldly gifts, special powers delivered from gods, religious mysticism, aliens,

accidents, and the unknown. They flew, sprinted, punched, and leaped often aided only by their capes, colourful body suits, and their fists. In the previous chapter, the importance of both a superhero's uniform and his equipment was explored in relation to his masculinity and heroic (but violent) identity. The themes, images, characters, and uniforms of contemporary superheroes have evolved into embodiments of technologically advanced, futuristic imaginings, and even real military weapons in current deployment. There exists an almost ubiquitous and all-consuming presence of military weapons technology and narratives about the politics of the application of such technologies in the most popular and profitable superhero movies of the present. Contemporary Hollywood superheroes are literally and figuratively draped in military technology.⁴¹

This chapter considers the symbiotic relationship between military technology and its (mis)representation in superhero films, and the way in which these (mis)representations affect security ideology, our perception of “securitizing”/heroic acts and security policy. It argues that scientific technology, American militarism, and Hollywood superhero films co-exist in a dialectical relationship in which their interdependence is infused with and motivated by others and it suggests that there are multiple significant connections between these films and our understandings of, attitudes towards, and policies around technology, security and the military. Finally, by considering the prominence of the cyborg/post-human superhero typology acknowledged

⁴¹ Just a few examples from the current decade include *Transformers* (2007; 2009; 2011), *Iron Man* (2008; 2010; 2013), *G.I. Joe* (2009; 2013), *Wolverine* (2009; 2013), *Captain America* (2011), *Captain America: Civil War* (2014), *The Avengers* (2012), *Terminator* (2003; 2009), *X-Men* (2000; 2003; 2006; 2009), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Star Trek* (2009), and *Avatar* (2009).

in the previous chapter, this analysis considers the dangerous implications for both soldiers and civilians if states prioritize military technology over human fleshy bodies.

By further unpacking the importance of superhero narratives and images by analyzing the representation of/and the use of drones, guns, bombs and other military weapons technologies, the performance of what is ultimately state (in)security becomes clearer and makes the death and destruction it produces more visible. That is, the way in which current and future weapons technologies are portrayed in superhero movies as precise, effective, and “ethical” is problematic for several reasons: First, it conflates advancements in military technology as synonymous for military success. This misperception reinforces the problematic assumption that technological development always equals military superiority and progress. This also, then, misrepresents the “development” of technology that kills as natural and necessary for the changing nature of war and contributes to popular misconceptions around and support for the development and use of military technology and may even have implications for the international community taking seriously (or not taking seriously) the need to manage, regulate, or control research and development and the use of military weapons.

Third, it conflates killing with heroism. Enabling the experience and enjoyment of these instruments while pre-emptively justifying their use because of the superheroes hyper-moral status (as discussed in Chapter’s 1, 2 and 3), works to conflate war with security, militarized violence with protection, and deeply engrains the practice of killing as an ethically acceptable practice. The public perception/misperception of real or fabricated present and future applications of military technology plays an important role in their acceptance and has the potential to affect the nation-state and global society in

determining the rules regarding future use. The seeming inseparability of military technology and heroic, patriotic and securitizing mythology in superhero films is thus entwined with the political, financial, and symbolic importance states place on their national militaries and military solutions and the public passivity towards and acceptance of this emphasis. Finally, it makes invisible the human costs of these technologies. One of the consequences of the glamorization of the weapons and stylistic presentation of their effects, including glamour shots of guns and gun-fire, tremendous explosions, and breathtaking air battles which affectively allow the audience to “enjoy” the multi-sensory experience of technologically advanced fighting and war, simultaneously erases the irreversible damage, death, and devastating and debilitating injuries to bodies, psyches, communities, and environments. Superhero battles are void of the traumatized bodies and corpses and the mental and moral injuries that the (sometimes very real instruments) they utilize inflict, rendering neutral audience recognition of them.

Why are films with techno-military themes in such abundance and why is it that these films in particular are so popular that they have become a formulaic model of blockbuster success? This chapter considers that popular culture texts are more than simply profit-making calculations but are reproductions of particular moral, political, and social ethos and this chapter reveals that contemporary productions prioritize and normalize advancements in military technology and military solutions. Thus the popularity of techno-military themes, articles, and effects by both producers and consumers requires that we unpack both the texts and the politics around their production. By examining these texts we produce a richer understanding of international politics. This chapter also further contributes to the thesis by demonstrating that what is political

about the intimate connections between entertainment and politics is found in both the ambiguous potential in reading a text as well as in the very real connections between the developments in military technology and their exposure on the big screen.

The Technology/Security Conundrum

That technological developments have produced shifts in war is a commonly held belief. Historically, numerous technological innovations have been closely linked to principal alterations of combat conduct. From the introduction of the chariot, to the invention of the machine gun, to the emergence of air power, the developments in our abilities for war-fighting have fostered an almost religious belief in the transformative power of technologies role in war (Rappert 2007, 6). Delgado explains that following WWII there was an emerging belief that the quality of military technology, rather than the mass production of weapons, would be the future predictor of wartime victory (1995-1996, 126). This resulted in an explosion of and funding for military research on technology: military research has contributed to the invention and development of countless technological devices we utilize in civilian society, and societal dynamics have been and continue to be shaped by the interconnection of economics, politics, technology, and the cultural activities for technological use in society (Murphie and Potts 2003, 20-21). Not surprisingly then, technology has always been an important site for analysis within the field of IR and security studies. Politics, war, and our understanding of global society are mediated on and through technological discoveries that influence our thoughts and behaviors.

Developments in digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and nanotechnology are today transforming the nature of warfare and, in particular, the possibilities for

militaries and their role in international politics. Proponents of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) argue that technological innovations in weapons and communications systems, in combination with force integration and the redefinition of material and human management, will significantly alter future security and defense objectives and achievements. Nonetheless, critics argue that technology will not always result in success in war, citing that in fact asymmetric and urban warfare is the reality for the 21st century battlefield. “Technology may not always produce a winner” exclaims Blackmore: while the first Gulf War and the carpet-bombing of Afghanistan in 2002 appeared to satisfy the Weinberger (or Powell) doctrine of “hitting hard and fast then getting out,” the 1993 Battle of the Black Sea in Somalia proved the opposite. The 1990 Gulf War, while initially a seemingly textbook case of RMA warfare in a high technology battle space, “the persistent and successful rebellions by local militias following the declared end of the ground war have shown, as in Somalia, that armies using the most advanced technology cannot ignore dedicated fighters with old outdated weapons” (Blackmore 2005, 34).

Every technology however, provokes transformations that raise questions and concerns not just regarding efficiency and effectiveness for military strategy but around ethics, individual agency, responsibility, and potential human consequences, both civilian and military. That is, as Rappert argues, the technology itself, including military robotics, cyber war, nanotechnology, and precision weapons, can produce revolutionary changes, and thus “occupies a rather problematic space, seen as both enabling and undermining conditions of security” (2007, 7). It is crucial that IR scholars and politicians interrogate what each technology means for the changing nature of war, and ask questions such as

what the ethical implications are of weaponizing robots. If, as Blackmore argues, technology may threaten to displace human intent or decision making (2005, 34), what legal steps are individual nations or international organizations willing to take? Will technology reduce human error, make wars safer or easier to conduct, and perhaps reduce the deterrent for going to war? Will advanced technology really reduce the costs and crimes of war? That is, who (or what) is really being secured by military technology? It is crucial to consider security concerns beyond the potential uses of these technologies for national security and defense, a focus in the research and development literature of military applications of technology that is, as we will see, being echoed in mainstream cinema. It is also, however, imperative to examine the ways in which military technology is being used to create more resilient soldier bodies, make invisible civilian casualties, attempt to sanitize the public perception of war, and the effects these technologies are having on the minds and bodies of the soldiers who use them.

Military Technology Propaganda?

The relationship between the US military and Hollywood, as discussed in Chapter 3, has been documented as mutually sustaining and pervasive. Though it is indisputable that the relationship between the military and Hollywood has influenced the content, promotion, and popularity of films, the relationship is not simply one-sided. There is a long history of the links between popular culture and specifically science fiction and military technology as portrayed in film and comic books and the research and development of military technology for the US military. For instance, Robert Heinlein's book *Starship Troopers* (1959) and Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* (1975) and *Forever Peace* (1997) have both been required reading at top military academies in the

past (West Point, the U.S. Air Force Academy) which, although quite different pieces of science fiction, have both been deemed useful to the military (Blackmore 2005, 8). In his book *Wired for War*, Singer documents how human rights experts when queried on the laws of unmanned warfare referenced *Blade Runner*, *The Terminator*, and *Robocop* with the same weight as they did the Geneva Conventions. At another human rights organization, two leaders even got into a debate over whether the combat scenes in *Star Trek* were realistic; their idea was that this could help determine whether the fictional codes of the Federation could be used as real-world guides for today's ethical choices in war. Isaac Asimov's "3 Laws of Robotics" has become *the* reference point for ethical discussions about robots. "Science fiction creates a frame of reference that shapes our hopes and fears about the future, as well as how we reflect on the ethics of some new technology" explains Singer. "Many of our expectations and ethical assumptions around real-world robots" he explains, "come from science fiction", however, the irony is that "the same stories that inspire and fund the research can also create assumptions that are incredibly frustrating to real-world researchers" (165).

Thus, there is evidently a significant connection between real world developments in military techno-science research and the popular culture media ecology (science fiction, comic books, etc.) that informs and motivates it. Just as science fiction has been revealed as a cultural expression of attitudes and a reflection of modern-day values around technology (Murphie and Potts 2003, 95), the most successful contemporary mainstream films and their heroes reveal an ideology around the technological revolution⁴² and its potential for ensuring military dominance. Indeed, the protagonists in

⁴² There is an accompanying ethos to the technological revolution that is represented by the convergence of several elements: neoliberalism, imperialism, capitalism and the militarization of scientific innovation. The

these films are superheroes that are often even physical embodiments of future military weapons applications for technology. Together with realistic military technology, narratives revolving around war, and computer graphics and digitized special effects, modern day superheroes are, as we will see, the perfect medium to deliver an ethos of militarization and the necessity of technological superiority.

Superheroes are Recruited ... Again⁴³

Today's re-incarnated superheroes have an intimate relationship with politics and are significant variables in the shaping of public opinion and the formation of self-identity. Superheroes, exclaims Dittmer, are co-constitutive elements of American identity and foreign policy (2012, 11). Hollywood's latest penchant for transforming superheroes into techno-military action stars using special effects combined with the mass marketing of big-budget Hollywood movies means that these influential heroes are reaching a larger audience than ever before and, thus, are increasingly important as elements within our social-political landscape.⁴⁴ The contemporary mainstream superhero that has proliferated in Hollywood embodies the rapid transformations in technology that societies are grappling with: several of the highest selling superhero films directly deal with military applications of technology research, the potential shift in the conduct of international war, and feature enhanced armoured soldiers.

globalization of military conflict, which goes hand in hand with the historical emergence of capitalism, has entered a new era of technological sophistication in the US dominated military economy. The result, as McNally describes, is that the level of destruction in our world has reached unparalleled levels with increasing moral complexities: "humans can now be killed on a massive scale by means of computer-guided missiles and weapons involving the use of advanced chemistry, biology or atomic science" (McNally 2006, 206).

⁴³ This subtitle refers to the well-documented utilization of superheroes such as Captain America during WWII as war propaganda discussed in Chapter 3.

⁴⁴ Between 2002 and 2012 over fifty "high-profile" films featuring Superhero characters were released and generated over fifteen billion dollars in global box office revenue, essentially making the Superhero movie the dominant genre of Hollywood cinema of the century (Hassler-Forest 2012, 3).

While science has always been a popular mode for explaining the origins of a superhero or bad guy's *raison d'être*, the superheroes of today are integrally bound with science through military technology that influences the costume/armour and weaponry of the superhero and is made even more life-like with special effects and digital technology that produces computer generated images. While the hyper-muscular masculine warrior physique of these heroes is undoubtedly integral to the hero mythology and military ethos presented (Crowe, 19-38), it is perhaps even more notable today that these bodies are almost always now augmented by technologically advanced militarized armour. Recent and ongoing iterations of Batman, Iron Man, Falcon, The Avengers, Transformers, and X-Men epitomize the nexus of military technology and the body through their origins, armour, and their "super" abilities. Miller (2006) provides several examples of how military style armour and equipment in both comics and film has historically been "equal parts fact and fiction": the James Bond jetpack in the movie *Thunderball* (1965), for example, inspired various manufacturers to work on a military jetpack, which is still being researched. "Second skin" armour systems that appear to be made of Kevlar, titanium, Neoprene, or a combination of "yet-to be-invented" materials, Miller explains, are frequently seen in superhero films such as the *X-men* and *Fantastic Four* and may in fact constitute "the next generation in personal stealth technology" (2006, 45). In the 2009 movie *G.I. Joe: The Rise of the Cobra*, one of the most spectacular scenes involves a high-speed chase through the streets of Paris with the protagonists displaying the mind-blowing capabilities of military designed Accelerator suits:

Heavy Duty: "Standing in front of you are Delta 6 Accelerator suits..."

Ripcord: "What's it accelerate?"

Heavy Duty: "You. It'll make you run faster, jump higher, and hit harder than any of your enemies. Let's suit up." (*G.I. Joe* 2009)

In the G.I. Joe scene, the viewer virtually dons the Accelerator in cinematography reminiscent of a first-person-shooter videogame and races through Paris (which is actually Prague) feeling what it might be like to have their own body enveloped in and aided by technology that, with the assistance of digital graphics and sound effects, may allow them to save the Eiffel Tower from the threat of nano-weapons in “the wrong hands”. The cinematography and CGI contributes to the experience by augmenting feelings of suspense and exhilaration and allows the participant to become part of the technology and revel in its power. While some critics suggest that the futuristic armour in prevalent in action/superhero movies has been spectacularized in such a way that it is the very implausibility of its existence and deployment that allows the audience to take pleasure in a violent scene (Delgado 1995-1996, 126), investigation into the similarities of technology presented in mainstream superhero films and of those currently being researched by the military implies that the opposite may now be more likely: the representations in many Hollywood films are often based on real military developments. Current military research on the “ideal” body armour, for example, indicates that it would likely enhance the protection of the soldier, increase their chances for survival, provide the necessary “edge” over the enemy, and perhaps even allow super-human like abilities. Thus, at its core, there is a vision that is strikingly similar to that presented in numerous Hollywood movies.

A hero’s costume, armour, and weaponry, can be the most important part of the superhero’s militaristic identity. Batman’s more recent costumes, for example, are more of a modern military’s dream than that of a colourful caped crusader and his technologically advanced arsenal is a display of military weapons currently undergoing

research in reality. In the Batman universe, pleasure and a sense of play is derived from watching gadgets such as the Batmobile and the Bat-suit in action and consumer desire is invoked from the commercialization of technology which follows through the production of consumer items. The Batman movies, Toh argues, “promote a matrix of consumer desire, military fetish and an ultimate reliance on force, not only feeding a taste for the tools and the toys of war but the desire to see them engaged in action” (2009, 1). As mentioned briefly in Chapter 3, Batman’s character has historically depended on military technology. *Batman Begins* (2005), for example, utilizing striking displays of gadgetry and armour, presents an ideology of war and technological innovation through the fantastical embodiments of current technological developments in military defense, the use of which argues Toh (2009), can be read as an allegory for America’s conduct in the War on Terror. The extent to which weapons are central to the Batman franchise is further demonstrated by a simple accounting of those used in *Batman: The Dark Knight* (2008): eleven pistols, seven revolvers, seven rifles, eight submachine guns, seven shotguns, two machine guns, a WZ.83 Pallad D cable launcher, a Norinco Type 69 RPG rocket launcher, Mk2, M26, and M67 hand grenades, a modified Keckler & Koch AG36 grenade launcher, an EMP (electromagnetic pulse) device, a microwave emitter, a grappling gun, and of course, the notable “Batpod”, an autonomous vehicle equipped with mini-cannons, machine guns, and grappling hooks (imfdb.org).⁴⁵

The second highest grossing film in the US of 2008, after *The Dark Knight*, was *Iron Man*, an adaptation of a comic book superhero series that focuses on an armoured

⁴⁵ It is important to note that imfdb.org accounts the different weapons used in a film but not the number of times it makes an appearance.

protagonist⁴⁶, and in the overwhelmingly positive responses to the film, reviewers repeatedly cited the high-tech special effects and military action that one could identify with as real—plausibly being used that very moment in the war in the Middle East. New York Magazine explained this popularity: “Favreau doesn’t go in for stylized comic book frames...he gets real with it – you’d think you were watching a military thriller” (Edelstein 2008). Variety Magazine simultaneously called the film an “expansively entertaining special effects extravaganza” while a *Newsday* Newspaper review called the film “plausibly rendered super-science” (Iron Man). Iron Man is the quintessential modern hero: he retains the essence of the traditional superhero, but his origins and the “source and sustenance” of his power has shifted from the supernatural to the more plausible source of science and technology, largely a result of the growth of scientific knowledge and the rapid advancement of technology in this century. Iron Man can be viewed as the embodiment of the military-industrial complex which epitomized the Cold War era, and whose contemporary identity as a weapons manufacturer bound up with his “humanity” and “protector” status as a superhero aided by modern technology makes him “even more devoted to ‘truth, justice and the American way’ than Superman ever was”. He is, explains Thomas Jr., a military inventor who himself can become a “living weapon” – America’s ideal superhero for the 21st century (Thomas, Jr. 2009, 152-153). While the original Iron Man emerged during an era where superheroes proliferated in a black and white world, the re-incarnated Iron Man in this decade receives much appeal

⁴⁶ The extensive fan-base for the re-incarnated hero and the backing by the biggest production companies in Hollywood have contributed to making Iron Man a mainstream icon. The comic book character that has inspired novels, television series, and the first computer generated graphic novel enjoyed a fantastic surge in popularity and viewership following the \$50 million dollar marketing campaign for the film’s release by production companies Marvel Studios and Paramount Pictures and the film grossed over \$582 million worldwide. Popular reviewers Ebert and Corlis named *Iron Man* as among their favorite films of 2008.

due to his flawed nature—a characteristic of most modern day superheroes discussed in Chapter 1. The “edgy” and “subversive” quality is bolstered by the merging of modern and futuristic technology with the superhero’s body forming a cyborg superhero, half-human half-machine, and thus engaging a new generation of viewers. This trait not only attracts the enormous fan-base of science fiction explains Thomas Jr., it allows the character to retreat into his “perfect technology” when struggling with his “imperfect humanity” (2009, 154).

That this power of technology is intimately tied up with militarism is palpable from the beginning of the film. The film introduces the audience to Anthony Edward “Tony” Stark (alter ego of our superhero and the CEO of Stark Industries, a chief weapons manufacturer for the U.S. military) as he flies off to war torn Afghanistan to give a demonstration of Stark Industries’ new weapon. The lead up in the scene that demonstrates the lethality of the “Jericho” cluster missile functions as a sort of advertising for the missile, military machismo and a techno-militarized determinism that nods to a break from the Cold War “peace”:

They say that the best weapon...is the one you never have to fire. I respectfully disagree. I prefer the weapon you only have to fire once. That’s how Dad did it, that’s how America does it...and it’s worked out pretty well so far. I present to you the newest in Stark Industries Freedom line. Find an excuse to let one of these off the chain, and I personally guarantee, the bad guys won’t even wanna come out of their caves. (Tony Stark, Iron Man 2008)

Tony Stark’s speech in this scene makes brilliant use of several emotionally loaded references including the nation, family, as well as a “baddass” warrior image constructed in opposition to a backwards foreign “other”. Knocked unconscious by one of his own company’s bombs, he wakes up in a cave with an electromagnet embedded in his chest, which had been put there by fellow captive and scientist Dr. Yinsin to prevent shrapnel

from working its way to his heart and killing him. We soon discover that Stark has been captured by a terrorist group who order Stark to build a Jericho missile for them. Instead, Stark and Dr. Yinsen secretly build a suit of armour powered by an arc reactor. That Tony Stark becomes Iron Man by virtue of “nothing more than his intelligence and advanced technology” (Rieder 2010, 38) is important because it offers a realism within a fantasy that does not require per se that we live in an alternate universe – all we would need to live in Iron Man’s world is a slight advancement in our own military technology (39). Tony’s subsequent escape from his own imprisonment most readily depends on his technological creation, and, explains Gangle “it is the technology of the armour that defeats the Ten Rings, and it is technology that subsequently transforms Tony Stark the man into Iron Man the hero” (Gangle 2010, 26). Throughout the three Iron Man movies released at the time of this writing, we are continually barraged with the mantra from Howard Stark, Tony’s revered father “everything is achievable through technology” (Iron Man 2, 2010) a theme that is reproduced in the Batman films as well.

The film is a veritable montage of scenes of military combat: close-up (computer generated) “glamour shots” of clashing armour, futuristic looking weapons, and extravagant explosions choreographed to a very “bad-ass” soundtrack. The most vivid example of this is in one of the most spectacular action sequences of the film in which Stark dons the Iron Man armoured suit and flies to Afghanistan to rescue a village from insurgents. His actions however, attract the attention of the US Air Force which dispatches two F-22 Raptors and a mid-air battle ensues. In this scene not only are we treated to an exhilarating military battle, it is set amidst the colonial rhetoric of Stark “saving the Afghans” – an example of the thematic protector/saviour myth discussed in

Chapter 1-3. During the action sequence—which was in fact filmed at Edwards Air Force Base in the Antelope Valley of California, home of the Air Force Flight Test Centre—Iron Man, in his super-suit of armour, becomes a human fighter plane, clashing with the US Air Force F-22 Raptors in a spectacular demonstration of weaponry as an extension of the human body: “Able to cruise at Mach 1.2 and generate 5,300 pounds of thrust, and with a flying range of 2,000 miles...Iron Man is a fair match for the U.S. Air Force F-22” (Thomas, Jr. 2009, 157). In this, as in many scenes throughout the Iron Man Franchise, violence becomes glorified by the stunning display of technology and weapons, and justified through its use by the popular superhero and his ultimate success in defeating the enemy.

The computer enhanced militarized sensationalism described in scenes above (and which fans now eagerly anticipate in contemporary superhero/action movies) succeed as a result of the cinematic formula that reproduces a military ethos that celebrates military technological innovation and the unquestioned assumption of the necessity of advancements in military technology. That is, these films sustain the problematic assumption that war and killing are mechanisms for the resolution of a myriad of problems. There are, it should be noted, anti-war messages and redemption themes in the film. For example, after breaking free from his captors, Stark announces that his company will no longer manufacture weapons. His decision is blocked by the board of directors at Stark Industries and Stark soon discovers that weapons produced by his own company, Stark Industries, including Jericho missiles, had in fact recently been delivered to Taliban insurgents—and thus has been supplying both the Americans and their enemies, a warning to the audience of putting profit before the common good and a disapproval of

war profiteering. In all of the *Iron Man* films the contradictions of military technological development and moral warnings of a high tech future emerge from the narratives.⁴⁷

Typically, the Marvel superhero films, while at times suggesting critical positions regarding the military technology within the narrative, ultimately celebrate science and technology generally and their military applications for the superhero and super-heroic actions specifically. Hassler-Forest offers a similar example in his analysis of Batman's surveillance technology in *The Dark Knight*, arguing that Batman's use of the technology is justified by the fact that he utilizes it only after other methods have failed, and is successful. His "moral responsibility" is confirmed by his destruction of the device after he uses it (2012, 179). In these as in most other superhero and action thrillers, military technology is only bad when it falls into the wrong hands, and any internal moral or political critique is typically resolved by the end of the film. Moreover, the protagonists characteristically utilize defensive weaponry (Stark shifts from weapons manufacturing to developing Iron Man's armour) while the "bad guy" is always in possession of an offensive weapon. Although our heroes battle against technology that has fallen into the hands of evil, in the end it is ultimately technology that is responsible for saving their lives and the lives of their loved one and/or civilization – for example, the arc-reactor in *Iron Man*. As Hassler-Forest explains, a film's "superficial rejection of the military-

⁴⁷ While some suggest that *Iron Man* is indeed nothing more than a "military thriller," others have focused on the anti-war themes throughout, suggesting that *Iron-Man* is in fact a vigilante Superhero inciting critique of US politics and the military. For instance, in the final battle scene of *Iron Man 3* (spoiler alert), Stark initiates the "Clean Slate" protocol and orders JARVIS to destroy every remaining *Iron Man* Suit. This scene can be read as a critique on technology, highlighting the dangers of rushed scientific research and warnings around the assumption that technological innovation is equal to progress for all of mankind. Or, the scene is simply the romantic gesture of a slightly insane billionaire to reveal his desire to spend more time with Pepper Potts.

industrial complex is contradicted by its ongoing celebration of militarized (and privatized) cutting-edge technology” (183).

Super-heroic Cyborg Soldiers

Bucky: “What was that?!”

Falcon: “Everyone’s got a gimmick now” – Captain America: Civil War (2016)

Iron-Man is, of course, himself a suit of armour. A cyborg that engenders technical, medical, and visual awe as the figure of both “man and machine”, “a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway, 149), a liberation of traditional binaries, a savior of mankind, and perhaps on the surface a superheroic embodiment of a utopian creature of the future. However, cyborg-superhero figures and the cyborg soldiers in the U.S. military are ultimately neoliberal masculinist military fantasies, and as Hassler-Forest argues, fulfill little of the transgressive potential Haraway hopefully suggested in her classic essay “The Cyborg Manifesto” (1991). Instead, Hassler-Forest argues, “they seem to function as technologically enhanced versions of the hard-bodied icons of masculinity from the Reagan era” (180), having “flattened difference, multiplicity, contextuality, and contingency” (Masters, 8). Cyborgs, Masters argues, have “rearticulated a masculine aesthetic of war that is even more violent” (8) and even more politically problematic because “the technologically enhanced superhero is in fact free to disregard the laws he is expected to uphold whenever he decides the circumstances demand it” (Hassler-Forest 2012, 180). This danger of erasure of responsibility, it will be shown, is compounded by the disappearance of the messiness of fleshy bodies in war in reality and in the spectacular aesthetic of superhero cyborg battles.

Full robot soldiers depicted widely in movies such as the *Iron Man*, *Star Wars*, *Transformers* and the *Terminator* series are correlated to the U.S army's use of remote controlled talon robots for explosive ordinance disposal, reconnaissance, and communications since 2002: "Once only the stuff of science fiction, full robot soldiers may one day take the place of human beings for the most hazardous of frontline duties, saving soldiers' lives by sacrificing their own motherboards and silicon chips" (Delgado 1995-1996, 26-43). Indeed, working models of various super-suits - modeled partly after Robert Heinlein's powered suit worn by the Mobile Infantry in his 1959 novel *Starship Troopers* – include the University of California at Berkeley's Lower Extremity exoskeleton (BLEEX), an exoskeleton by robotics company Sarcos which would strengthen the soldier, and the Land Warrior proposed by the Army in 1991, which would advance to a newer infantry model called the Objective Force Warrior to be replaced by the Future Force Warrior by 2010.⁴⁸ Such initial attempts at a weaponized 'supersuit' illuminate the early desire to integrate the soldiers' body with new machines; the desired IHAS for example bears a remarkable resemblance to Iron Man's Graphical User Interface (GUI). The GUI allows Stark to control his suit via voice control and eye movements and contains futuristic data visualization that allows him to distinguish "terrorists" from "civilians". Iron Man's slick operation of the technology and the visuals that hearken to the "first-person-shooter" video game perspective evoke a popular fantasy

⁴⁸ The 1991 iteration, for example, would comprise: "'light-weight ballistic armored material' extra underbody armour for defense against mines; an infrared scrambler; a 'built-in cooling system in which a coolant substance flowed through the outer skin via a network of plastic capillaries,' erasing any thermal signature and thus making it invisible to infrared scopes; and liquid crystals woven into the suit's fabric that would mimic 'the colour of the underbrush; in the desert, the colour of sand, rocks, and arid vegetation' [...] The body is partly armoured, partly invisible; the other materials (thermal imaging cameras, zoom lenses, GPS) enhance human senses [...] The human head is now a mount for the Integrated Helmet Assembly Subsystem (IHAS), which is connected to the rifle, camera, and GPS by a long umbilical" (42).

of a “clean war” with no civilian casualties, an invincible soldier (Superhero), and the experience of exciting cutting edge technology (Hassler-Forest, 180-5).

The development of soldier nanotechnologies, which is heavily funded by the US government, is another example of a symbiotic relationship between superheroes and military research—they both appear to draw from and influence one another as Milburn’s (2005) analysis indicates. The published research mission of MIT’s Institute for Soldier Nanotechnologies (ISN) states:

[T]he ISN’s research mission is to use nanotechnology to dramatically improve the survival of soldiers. The ultimate goal is to create a 21st century battlesuit that combines high tech capabilities with light weight and comfort. Imagine a bullet-proof jumpsuit, no thicker than ordinary spandex that monitors health, eases injuries, communicates automatically, and maybe even lends superhuman abilities. (ISN 2004)

It is hard to dismiss the visual image this new version of the spandex-clad superhero: The soldier’s uniform of the future will “instantaneously can become stronger than steel” thus “protecting against bullets, explosive blasts, toxins, electromagnetic pulses, and other threats of postmodern battlespace” (Milburn 2005, 82). In the proceedings of a 2001 workshop funded by the National Science Foundation and Department of Commerce on human performance enhancement through the convergence of nanotechnology with biotechnology, and cognitive science, Michael Goldblatt—chair of the Defense Sciences Office at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) the US Agency responsible for most new war technology—announced:

DARPA has recently begun to explore augmenting human performance to increase the lethality and effectiveness of the war fighter by providing for super physiological and cognitive capabilities...These “super” capabilities would stem from biomechanical exoskeletons and musculature actuators, as well as metabolic redesign of the soldiers body against shock, trauma, and sleep deprivation. They could include psionic powers like telekinesis, for through a nanowired “brain machine interface,” a soldier might command peripheral computers, vehicles, and weapons with thoughts alone. (Milburn 2005, 83)

The *soldier's body* could literally be made to *be* the weapon in reality.

The military continues to search for ways to further extend the soldiers body to have “superhuman” capabilities, that go beyond the developments in armour and human/brain interfaces discussed above, but now chemically penetrate the human body. Dextroamphetamine, for example, or Dexedrine (now called “go-pills” by the US Air Force), which was officially banned by the Air Force in 1992 but officially restored later in the 1990s is one part of the chemical programming being utilized to create a ‘super-soldier’⁴⁹:

Dexedrine is merely one part of DARPA’s plan for a twenty-four-hour war-fighter; two programs are at work on the problem: one is Continuous Assisted Performance (CAPS), the other is Preventing Sleep Deprivation (PSD). Both seek to reduce pilots’ (and ground troops’) need for sleep through manipulation of circadian rhythms and the use of new chemicals like Ampakines (drugs that enhance alertness, short-term memory, and decision-making). Reassurance by the Air Force that ‘go-pill’ use is carefully monitored does not negate the fact that Dexedrine represents a systemic desire for perpetually wakeful soldiers. (Blackmore 2006, 195)

The potential uses for these attempts at bodily control is not limited by science and technology, DARPA believes, but by the limits of the human “war fighter” (195). The goal of making soldiers “superhuman” through Metabolic Dominance is one of DARPA’s more recent programs: “Like the sleepless pilot, the ideal ground soldier is one who needs little rest and, ideally, no food. Troops move better the less they carry, so the ideal soldier will need no pack, food, or water” (197). Having entered the second phase of the program, scientists are now working towards their ultimate goal: “to enable superior physical and physiological performance by controlling energy metabolism on demand.

⁴⁹ Interestingly, in a highly publicized “friendly-fire” incident in 2002, American pilots who bombed Canadian troops reported that their clarity and thought-processing abilities had been distorted from Dexedrine use.

An example is continuous peak performance and cognitive function for 3-5 days, 24 hours per day, without the need for calories” (197). This is currently being pursued through the application of a skin-patch or slow release pill that will enable the soldier to function without sleep or food at a high-level performance. “The new war-fighter,” asserts Blackmore “is a science fantasy dreamed by insomniac DARPA” (2005, 197), and the biggest challenge is not developing the chemicals or the hardware, but the human body itself: “As combat systems become more and more sophisticated and reliable, the major limiting factor for operational dominance in a conflict is the warfighter” (2005, 195). Faith in scientific rationalism has positioned military technology as more reliable than the infallible human body and mind. As Blackmore explains:

The military has put its faith in scientific rationalism, planning, engineering, information technology, biochemistry, and biomedicine. It has in every possible way applied physics, chemistry, math, engineering, and the life sciences to war in order to get more product (victory, territory, resources) for less cost (dead people, lost machinery – wastage). (2006, 196)

The result is that the human body, the individual subject becomes a dispensable and disposable part of war-fighting at best and a liability at worst while all value and faith becomes put in the machines and the programmers who make morality judgments at input.

The possible repercussions of such “solutions” in reality, which as of yet are mostly unknown, are nothing less than terrifying: Major Richard Gabriel warned in 1987 of the “the full range of human mental and physical actions become[ing] targets for chemical control” (1987, 196). The long-term effects, many of which are as of yet unknown, are suffered on the soldiers’ bodies and mental state, potentially creating a “chemically changed soldier whose mind has been made over in the image of a true

sociopathic personality” (1987, 195). The following scene from the 2009 *GI Joe* film engages this fear directly:

The Doctor: So far, we’ve created twenty Neo-Vipers. Nineteen stand before you.

Destro: Is it working?

The Doctor: We injected one thousand cc’s of the nanomite solution into each subject. When they...finally stopped screaming, brain scans showed a complete inactivity of the self-preservation region of the cortex.

Destro: English, Doctor.

The Doctor: They feel no fear. Cortical nerve clusters showed complete inactivity. They feel no pain. Concepts of morality are disengaged. They feel no regrets. No remorse.

Destro: Are they completely obedient?

The Doctor: Of course. The real world applications are endless. So you tell me...is it working? (*G.I. Joe* 2009)

The concern with the potential costs of “military solutions” on the human body and mind are repeatedly reflected subversively in popular culture, often in dystopian and apocalyptic visions such as in the infamous *Terminator* series. In Marvel’s *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) which received an academy award nomination for “Best Visual Effects”, involves the prisoner of war Bucky Barnes who has been experimented on and then brainwashed in order to be deployed on dangerous missions. Hydra’s General of the Nazi Deep Science Division explains: “Our goal, is to create a new breed of super-soldier” (*Captain America: The Winter Soldier* 2014):

Bucky Barnes: I'm not the only Winter Soldier.

Steve Rodgers: Who were they?

Bucky Barnes: The most elite death squad. (Ibid.)

The film provokes us to reflect upon the psychological trauma this causes:

Steve Rodgers: What you did all these years ... it wasn't you. You didn't have a choice.

Bucky Barnes: I know. But I did it. (Ibid.)

As technology has integrated human bodies into a “cyborgian weapons system”, declares Gray, it has simultaneously rendered them exceedingly vulnerable (216). The

increasing interest in bodily matters for “strategic” and “security” institutions, warns Masters, should raise a red flag: “The more that bodily matters are taken up by military and government institutions, the more bodies are disappeared and thus made absent”. By constituting the cyborg as a legitimate political subject, the more the human soldier is cast as “problem” in need of solutions. Citing the growing number of soldiers living with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Masters explains how the “unreliable” and “unruly” fleshy human body is now cast as the weakest link, requiring modifications, technological grafting, and to ultimately be reconstituted in such a way as to “dispel the susceptibility of the human body” (4). Today, health, wellness and fitness programming in military institutions through programs like “Comprehensive Soldier Fitness” and “Initiative, Creativity and Enthusiasm” (ICE) are further ways in which intrusive mechanisms to govern the soldier’s mind and body are being used to create a more “resilient” force.

Another danger, however, is the erasure of the material realities of techno-war and the abstract disembodiment from the realities of war:

Military personnel who will never be in physical battle, who literally sit in front of computer screens, have now been constituted as soldiers through the interface, effectively enlarging and reconfiguring the representations of soldiers...Cyborg soldiers, almost by definition, may never have to lay *human eyes* on their enemy again – the gaze will be that of a gun sight, the computer screen, and global positioning satellite targeting systems (7).

Consider the recounting of a fighter pilot during NATO’s intervention in Kosovo:

“Killing people does not go through your mind [...] it’s all so technological. I had no Serbian in mind [...] I was shooting at a radar pulse” (Wallace, 2000). What disappears, then, as Masters and Blackmore warn, is a responsibility to others and humane restraint as technology “not only becomes a shield for humans”, says Gray, but literally replaces human responsibility (103). As Gregory points out, however, it is not just the *visibility* of

the dead that is that is needed but an understanding of our acceptance of the violence that destroys particular human bodies:

Making the bodies of those killed and injured by drones visible challenges the sanitized images that dominate discussions about the legality of targeted killings, but it is important to note that this increased visibility will not necessarily disrupt the necropolitical logic that has rendered these lives vulnerable to begin with... Unless we are prepared to confront the embodied experiences of those killed and injured by drones, we will never quite grasp the pain and suffering the victims were forced to endure. (Gregory 2015)

Dave Grossman, a lecturer on how to “bulletproof” (desensitize) military professionals for the use of deadly force suggests in his text “On Killing” that there is a way to prevent our militaries from worrying about death in the future: the military-medical establishment, he argues, will be the solution to the negative experiences of those returning from war and to facilitate “tougher” more resilient soldiers. “Where do we get such men and women?” Grossman challenges, “We build them. We build them and nurture them one step at a time” (Grossman 1).

Lessons from Our Heroes

Advancements in technology have impacted the ways in which wars are fought, the outcome, and the casualties, and as a result have fostered an almost religious belief in their transformative potential for war (Rappert 2007, 6). Delgado (1995-1996, 126) explains that the emergent view post-WWII that the quality of military technology rather than the mass production of weapons would be the future predictor of wartime victory resulted in an explosion of military research on technology: military research has contributed to the development of innumerable technological devices we utilize in civilian society, and societal dynamics have been and continue to be shaped by the interconnection of economics, politics, and technology (Murphie and Potts 2003, 20-21). Not surprisingly then, technology has always been an important site for analysis within

the field of IR and security studies. Politics, war, and our understanding of global society are moderated on and through technological discoveries that influence our thoughts and behaviors. Rapid developments in and increased deployment of digital technologies, artificial intelligence and robotics, and nanotechnology are undoubtedly changing the way policymakers and the military think about war and opening up the possibilities for militaries and their role in international politics.

Proponents of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) argue that technological innovations in weapons and communications systems, in combination with force integration and the redefinition of material and human management, will significantly alter future security and defense objectives and achievements. The large number of robots that have entered service of the military in the past decade in the army, navy, and air force are already doing a multitude of laborious, protective and deadly tasks. Military applications for nanotechnology currently being researched include miniature computers and smart materials, miniature sensors for explosives, radiation, and food/water contamination, lighter and stronger materials, body implants and body manipulation and autonomous systems (Altman 2006; Ratner and Ratner 2004).

While the future of military technology may seem to present a “cleaner, better way to fight” warns Blackmore (2005, 7), it is unlikely that it will always produce a winner. For example, asymmetric and urban warfare has proven to dominate the 21st century battlefield: while the first Gulf War and the carpet-bombing of Afghanistan in 2002 appeared to satisfy the Weinberger (or Powell) doctrine of “hitting hard and fast then getting out”, the 1993 Battle of the Black Sea in Somalia proved the opposite. The second Gulf War, while initially a seemingly textbook case of RMA warfare in a high

technology battle space, revealed through “the persistent and successful rebellions by local militias following the declared end of the ground war,” as in Somalia, “that armies using the most advanced technology cannot ignore dedicated fighters with old outdated weapons” (Blackmore 2005, 34).

In addition to unrealistic assumptions regarding success strategically, as a consequence of the speed at which transformation is occurring and the rapid pace in which new developments are being incorporated into the theatre of war, moral, ethical, and legal considerations of military technology are lagging far behind the materialization of their consequences. Moreover, the fantasy that advancements in technology can make killing “cleaner” is just that – a fantasy: citing the strategizing that took place prior to the 2004 American attack on Fallujah, for example, Blackmore exclaims that “light technology and precision weapons” in reality gave way to “heavy power and indiscriminate slaughter” (7). Every technology provokes transformations that raise questions and concerns not just regarding efficiency and effectiveness for military strategy but around ethics, individual agency, responsibility, and potential human consequences, both civilian and military. That is, as Rappert argues, the technology itself, including military robotics, cyber war, nanotechnology, and precision weapons, can produce revolutionary changes, and thus “occupies a rather problematic space, seen as both enabling and undermining conditions of security” (2007, 7).

The future impacts of new technologies on the changing nature of war are not entirely known, nonetheless it is crucial to ask questions regarding the ethical implications of their use. Will technology reduce human error, make wars safer or easier to conduct, and perhaps reduce the deterrent for going to war? Will advanced technology

reduce the costs and crimes of war? If, as Blackmore argues, technology may threaten to displace human intent or decision-making (2005, 34), what are the potential political and legal implications of this? What are the potential uses of these technologies beyond the military and what are the potential consequences of such technology being appropriated by others? Who (or what) is really being secured by military technology? Most importantly, we need to ask ourselves whether investments in military technology are resulting in an inevitable trade-off between people and equipment – including the physical, mental and emotional effects of potential transformations on the human body.

One of the dangers in the humanization of technology, argues Delgado, is that it “facilitates the displacement of guilt in the central power’s tactics of disappearance by displacing the representation of death from human bodies onto technological bodies” (1995-1996, 136). George Bernard Shaw’s warning against hero worship is even more pertinent to our discussion of the military’s attempt to create superhumans/supersoldiers through technological and chemical advancements. The potential for grievous trauma, injury, and death of human soldiers obliges serious consideration of the implications of such developments. Current research on soldier nanotechnologies being done by the US Department of Defense that seek to augment human performance to create a “super-” or “cyborg” soldier suggests that the role and capacity of the military needs to be interrogated in the context of both the changing nature of defense and security policy, and the social and cultural environment in which these changes are occurring, and the ethical implications of their intended uses.

If, as Kellner argues, contemporary Hollywood cinema “transcodes the political discourses of the era” (2), then American militarism and its present and future use of

expanding applications of technology is without a doubt a growing social and political concern. The use of technology to create an “enhanced”, “machine-like”, “super-human”, “super-soldier”, inspired by popular culture, to augment military operations suggest that both military techno-science and superheroes are infused with and motivated by each other, their interdependence relying on cultural mythologies that are appropriated by and relied on for their visual interpretation and technical application. Scientific technology, American militarism, and superhero images seem to co-exist in a dialectical relationship. Just as nanotechnology is integrating ideas and images for the production of a “soldier of the future,” pop culture sites with superhero narratives may also prove a useful vehicle for introducing alien ideas to society and making militarism and the military not just a natural phenomenon but also a more attractive option (or the only option) for resolving conflict. Similar to the way entertainment and news media tends to favour certain policy outcomes by taking cues from policymakers and the elite, and therefore, argues Carruthers, “privilege military options over other possible outcomes to international disputes” (20), so may Iron Man contribute to an ethic of technological superiority and a reliance on military hardware for winning wars, at the expense of very real soldiers and civilians. Consider the following statement by Patrick Salsbury, the Senior Associate of the Foresight Institute and a major site of nanotechnology research: “I think comics are an excellent way of reaching youth and presenting ‘far out and fantastic’ notions... Might be worth exploring how we could utilize this vector to reach more young people” (Milburn 2005, 95). On a practical level, the potential for public fear or implausible expectations as a result of misinformation can create a hope/hype outcome that can affect both the public acceptance of policy decisions before and during war as well as public

reactions to national and international efforts around the control and regulations of future weapons. Public perception is also connected to the normalization of political violence when war and battle are glorified: scientific rationality becomes the medium through which violence is sanitized and made more effective—this violence then becomes legitimized in and through popular culture. When military technology is glorified and the politics of killing is bound up with the celebration of military violence, the result is the normalization of war and the military and the continued development of the war machine.

That superhero films also are exhibiting an awareness or concern in this regard, however, is visible in the creative and subversive uses of humour and dialogue discussed in Chapter 1. Consider, for example, the way in which Iron Man's suits consistently fail him. Or how, when in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), Tony Stark's artificial intelligence system J.A.R.V.I.S gets infiltrated and destroyed by Ultron who, created by Stark and Banner as a peacemaking program decides to destroy the biggest threat to the planet – humans. Consider the way in which humour is utilized as critique in the following conversation between Falcon and Black Widow in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) regarding Falcon's drone "Redwing" after it saved Black Widow's life:

Black Widow: Thanks.

Falcon: Don't thank me.

Black Widow: I'm not thanking that *thing*.

Falcon: His name is Redwing.

Black Widow: I'm still not thanking him.

Falcon: He's cute. Pet him.

The moral ambiguity around military technology expressed in this scene is one of many examples of the popular recognition of the uneasiness around technology typically expressed through humour in Marvel's films. In critically interrogating representations of a techno-militarized super-soldier/hero, concerns of the potential dangers of the perpetual

pursuit of military dominance through technological innovation and of its reproduction in popular culture emerge; that these concerns are visible in the popular cultural artifacts themselves demonstrates their important role as a form of interrogation. In the concluding chapter I return to this idea of superhero films as political entities in and of themselves and as important sites of meaning-making. Not only are superheroes important figures through which we can gain knowledge about the world around us, but as visual, symbolic, and representational images that are transformed over time in relation to the society and cultures within which they are (re)created, they may be one of the most important – and entertaining! - examples of political knowledge to emerge from popular culture.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion – Spoiler Alert: Every Good Superhero Movie has a Sequel

This project contributes to opening up unbounded ways of moving forward in the discipline of IR by paying attention to popular culture - I believe that such an approach enables critical practices that can complicate and enhance our understandings of war and politics. To quote James Der Derian in a recent interview with e-IR, “When the world is changing so fast, we need to change our ways of thinking as well try to keep up with the objects referent. Otherwise we’ll never get out of what looks to me like a permanent war, or at best an interwar, in which we fail to actualize any kind of real peace” (Interview 2016). This dissertation has shown how the ways in which the superhero is produced and experienced and is entangled with the commodification and reproduction of ideologies of heroism, security, technology, male masochism and masculinity, and violence. The images and narratives relate to reality in the ways they reflect, reproduce, impact, and converge with policy, political and everyday discourse, ideology, and behaviour. In way of conclusion then, this chapter suggests potential ways of moving forward: through engagement with the politics of affect and the broader inclusion of aesthetic approaches in IR to enable a more transgressive politics.

The Affective Register and Unpacking Our ‘Experience’ of Superheroes

One effect of our “experience” of the superhero on film as we have seen in Chapters 3 and 5, is that it can, often unintentionally, coax us to accept, celebrate and become immune to spectacular violence which is accomplished partially by sanitizing the real impacts of violence and war. This occurs not just at the narrative or representational register, but also in our embodied emotions as all of our senses are engaged in the experience of viewing by particular methods of the filmmaker. The techniques which filmmakers utilize to skillfully engage audiences in heroic imaginings in contemporary Hollywood film is where this project can move

forward and make further interventions. Consider, for example, Gray's proposal that there exists a "positive aesthetic delight in the experience of destruction" in his book *The Warriors*:

While it is undeniable that the disorder and distortion and the violation of nature that conflict brings are ugly beyond compare, there are also color and movement, variety, panoramic sweep, and sometimes even momentary proportion and harmony. If we think of beauty and combat without their usual moral overtones, there is often a weird but genuine beauty in the sight of massed men and weapons in combat. (Gray 1967, 31)

To return to the example of the Disney propaganda cartoons discussed in Chapter 2, the technique of animated drawing, argues Lawrence and Jewett, "allowed Disney to retain a satisfying level of violence while removing the elements that might make his audience squeamish" (2002, 188). They go on to explain

Given the freedom to make funny animals behave without following the laws of nature, he was able to immunize them against the effects of violence. Heads could be bashed in and bodies rolled flat, only to bounce back alive in the next instant. Destructive actions against the bodies of others became the stock device of cartoon humor... These extreme varieties of bodily violence, which would obviously be fatal for human foreclosers, are diffused by animation to permit the audience to have the good, clean fun they have come reverently to expect from Disney. (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 188-189)

Such "defused violence that can be enjoyed without aftereffect" (Ibid. 189) is very similar to the way in which beloved comic super-humans are brought to "life" and staged in beautiful but devastating battles with the use of digital and special effects, stunt actors, etc. but inevitably live to see another day. We need to investigate how filmmakers use sound, cinematography, CG, and "kinesthesia" as deliberate aesthetic choices to affect audiences, and how this might contribute to propagating a problematic worship of the militarized hero. That is, in what ways is the *affect* of heroic representations in popular culture, and in Hollywood representations of superheroes specifically, political? Why is it important to pay attention to the way representations of "the hero" make us feel, in particular, in Hollywood film?

The affective turn is a rich vein of thinking (Ahmed, 2004; Massumi 2002; Deleuze 1986; 1987; 1993; Singh 2014) that can contribute further to understanding the socio-political

impacts of popular culture and political possibilities. Future work in this area then, might contribute to moving us beyond representational and allegorical analyses of popular culture generally and film specifically. Deliberate aesthetic choices are made by filmmakers to get audiences to "feel", to be affected emotionally and physically. That is, filmmakers understand the importance of eliciting an embodied response to their films and if we want to expand our conception of the relationship of politics and film then we must consider the importance of the elicitation of emotion and sensory experiences.

“I am Batman!” The Full-Immersion Superhero

One potential inroad into this area of study might involve considering the recent evolution of a “Full-Immersion Superhero” or “Immersive Superhero”. Advancements in CG in the last decade have moved away from “spectacle” and allowed us to become fully integrated as a part of the action as has been discussed briefly in Chapter 4 and 5. Now, battle scenes are sometimes entirely CGI (for example, the final battle between the Hulk and Abomination in *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) and the battle between Spider Man and the Lizard in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) were almost entirely special effects, including the created location scene). Thus, as Wickman argues,

And while practical effects remain as expensive as ever, convincing computer-generated ones have become cheaper and cheaper. This has allowed action movies to escape even further from reality, abandoning C-4 and good old reliable stick dynamite for alien weaponry and wand blasts and repulsor beams. As Adam Sternbergh argued in the New York Times Magazine, explosions were once one of the three main components of the American action film, but then “computer animation gobbled up everything, chewing it all into weightless pixels.” Now it can be as cheap to make the fantastical look real as it is to stage carnage. (“Implosions in the Avengers”, Slate, Forrest Wickman)

The labour required to produce such fabricated realism is evidence of its’ burgeoning importance and fortitude in the future of the industry. In *The Avengers* (2012), for example, there were more than 2,200 visual effects shots completed by 14 different companies, these included the entire

NY cityscape, the Helicarrier, and even the Iron Man and the Hulk (interestingly, there are more than 12 explosions in the first 25 seconds of *The Avengers* trailer). Both the trend towards realistic sensationalism and the ability to push our fantastical imaginations regarding military technology shows no signs of slowing down: Industrial Light & Magic, the largest visual effects company in the world, created by George Lucas for the production of *Star Wars* in 1977, has created the effects for over 300 films and has achieved almost every milestone in motion picture visual effects from the first completely computer-generated character to the first “morphing” sequence. The company was acquired by The Walt Disney Company in 2012 and has since begun expanding globally, opening a London studio in October of 2014.

As a result of such development in the industry, action in film is now not just “made alive”, but we are made to feel as though we are living in it. That is, while the films themselves are more fantastical, the huge leaps that have been made in CG techniques in the last few years allow us to maintain a kinetic connection with our characters and environment. There is both a visual intensity and an experiential, visceral, and kinesthetic sensation achieved through camera work, editing, sound, and special effects that allows us to feel as though a part of the action. So, while visual effects create freedom from the constraints historically of attempts at reality-based filmmaking, they allow the fantastical to *feel* more visceral than ever before; we are increasingly surrounded by enhanced visual mediums that allows and encourages us to experience the inconceivable and for it to be believable.

As discussed in Chapter 5, one of the potential problems is that while we are embedded in the physicality of action, there is no negative repercussions of that action; there is no blood, no permanent harm, injury or damage, no collateral damage, and no death. Consider, for example, the final battle scene of *The Avengers*: we see citizens running to escape the battle, and vain

attempts to evacuate civilians, yet there is no visible collateral damage other than the destruction of roads and buildings. Manhattan is essentially destroyed in the battle with “the aliens”, but this fact is ignored/forgotten. Iron Man martyrs himself and commits suicide to save the city, but of course, at the last minute, miraculously survives. The result, is an embedded sensory experience of fighting in a morally righteous battle framed by a justifiable sense of heroic defense and protection with none of the trauma. Moreover, because we are on the side of the superhero, who is already justified in their acts of a priori legitimate violence, we are assured of our own role participating in the nations/humanities salvation. This strategy allows us the kinetic connection to action (through CG, cinematography, the film aesthetic), but, as explored in chapter 4, simultaneously allows us to dismiss any moral concerns around ethics, war, and violence. Movies allow us to *feel* fear and terror, anxiety, excitement, and experience the adrenaline rush of action and the satisfaction of vigilante justice without ever being in any *real* danger and without suffering any real physical consequences (importantly, film trauma can produce real psychological effects). Movies allow us to *be* the superhero, the warrior, the heroic avenger, the futuristic soldier and to experience the pride, satisfaction, and glory without ever having to do the *actual* labour and risk our own or others’ lives for said glory or justice. No wonder it’s *really* fun to be the hero.

Towards an Aesthetic Politics

Can we afford the sustained de-legitimation and rejection of novel approaches to politics in IR that may engender different ways of understanding our dilemmas? The relatively new focus on popular culture and IR has incited discussion and stimulated debate on productive ways of taking seriously popular culture with much criticism directed towards mimetic readings of popular culture that approach artifacts as useful tools to help explain the political world and as

pedagogical devices for students learning about IR (See for example Drezner 2011). While such readings can be politically and pedagogically valuable, they are also epistemologically limited and bear the risk of reinforcing dominant paradigms thus replicating rather than troubling or reimagining the so-called “truths” of the discipline, or are produced “as a means of reinforcing a very orthodox vision of what IR and politics might be” (Grayson 2015). So what might a critical engagement with popular culture in IR look like? Pablo K explains it takes many forms:

So what do we speak of when we speak critically of pop culture and world politics? We say that pop culture “reproduces” things (power relations, prejudices, myths about politics); that it “naturalizes” existing histories and power relations, even if in a fantastical register; that it “mirrors” our own political worlds, “illustrates concepts”, expresses geopolitical anxieties; or is otherwise “illuminative” of contemporary politics. It may not act as a linear cause on real world events, but nevertheless “provide[s] one layer in the complex continuum” producing feelings towards others. Following Cindy Weber, “fictional universes serve as silent, sub-textual pillars of the real”. More strongly, SF [science fiction] can make “ethical sophistication [possible] by displacing events” or even in part contribute to the “constitution of a world in which hierarchy, intervention and militarism are taken for granted”, the world in question being ours. Drezner himself is both more cautious and more open: pop culture “often provides a window into the subliminal or unstated fears of citizens”. (Pablo K 2015)

That is, says Grayson, rather than operating within the status quo, a political engagement with pop culture must understand

how the sites and artefacts of popular culture may reproduce existing understandings, representations, and affects that help to maintain forms of hegemony as well as to examine the ways in which they critique, provide alternatives, or even ask very different questions about what politics is, what it does, and where it is located. To put it another way, what do artefacts in popular culture present as being natural, common, or deviant? In what ways do artefacts engage us? What do they allow us to sense, feel, and articulate? What do they foreclose? (Grayson 2015)

While such “critically analogical” approaches, as Pablo K calls them, are thus indeed more ontologically open, we may still be foreclosing a certain richness that is entangled with the pleasures, desires, fears, that is, the *feelings* through which political potential might be unlocked. It is through a more fundamental aesthetic encounter that explores the role of various faculties in the interpretation of the world that is needed, maintains Bleiker:

...our decisions would be better informed, our political options would broaden significantly, if we found more ways of appreciating the insight of those who aesthetically explore, with whatever means available to them, the multitude of interactions between the different faculties, including those that had been banished or subjugated by the prevalence of technological reason. (Bleiker 2001, 531)

An engagement with the aesthetic offers transformative potential including destabilizing the hierarchies of not just our social and political realities but also of the discipline; it is unsurprising then that such scholarship has not been widely embraced by the core of the discipline but remains at the margins. The current discipline of IR, which self-depicts as the institutional citadel for understanding power and how it functions in the global (dis)order, cannot, explains Grayson “account for how power works through normalization, discipline, alienation, mythologization, affect, control, representation, performativity, production, and/or the processes of constructing political imaginations that are central to world politics” (2015).

Change, Self-reflexivity, Critique

For me the great hope is now that 8mm video recorders are coming out, people who normally wouldn't make movies are going to be making them. And that one day a little fat girl in Ohio is going to be the new Mozart and make a beautiful film with her father's camcorder. For once the so-called professionalism about movies will be destroyed and it will really become an art form. – Francis Ford Coppola

Is it possible, that the contemporary superhero is moving us away from simplistic representations of good versus evil? Can superheroes be a symbol for nonviolence, peace, justice and equality and represent an ethic of kindness towards all creatures, a humanity that encourages joyfulness rather than competition and conquest? We have seen how the creation of multifaceted characters, the utilization of humour and satire, the inclusion of themes of moral ambiguity and the subversion of genre conventions such as the reliance on dichotomous world views and rigid character roles has begun to shift within the world of re-incarnated traditional superheroes in ways that are allowing for nuanced understandings of politics and security. Such shifts that allow for the embodiment of complex and mobile identities, motivations, and physical manifestations

makes it increasingly possible to redefine the parameters and paradigms of heroism and security in ways that do not rely solely on the use of force and reactionary defense of the status quo which is often problematically ensconced in hierarchical power relations.

We are witnessing the abundant creation of new superhero characters that attempt to move away from the super-heroic association with militarized violence, gendered and raced hierarchies, and are troubling narratives of patriotism and hyper-moral retributive justice; through these innovations, artists and creators are reclaiming superheroes' symbolic weight and ubiquity. One example of this is the "Burka Avenger", a Pakistani produced television program about a superheroine/school teacher Jiya. In the show, the superheroine uses inspiration, her knowledge, and symbolically, her pens and books to fight for "Justice, Peace and Education for all" while sending messages of female empowerment ("Burka Avenger"). The mild-mannered teacher at an all-girls school in a small village in northern Pakistan, Halwapur, uses her burka to conceal her identity while fighting villains who are typically corrupt politicians and anti-education fundamentalists. Having won several awards including the Peabody award and being named one of the 11 most influential fictional characters of all time by Time, the show is set to be aired in 18 different languages in 60 different countries. As Davis from the Huffington Post describes, "Disney could learn a thing or two about what a female protagonist should look like from the fearless Burka Avenger" (Davis 2013); unfortunately, heroic characters of this sort only ever seem to gain notoriety outside of the mainstream of Hollywood. However, while media convergence, represented by horizontal integration of media ownership and production and the exorbitantly high commercial stakes in the contemporary "entertainment supersystem" are creating a seemingly impenetrable force of narrative and imaginary delivery systems, increased access to converging media technology "enables multiple points of entry into the consumption

process”: this allows fans to become “active participants within the current media revolution” and helps to “break down barriers of entry into the media marketplace” (Jenkins 2001, 551-555).

Metaphors are the “basic building blocks of how we think and communicate” in that they represent and create meaning and structure how we see the world and how we might remake it (Howard 2014). Just as “the language we use to describe war, and the frames of reference we use to make sense of our experiences” as Gregory (2015) argues, “marginalizes the horrors of contemporary practices of violence, erasing the pain and suffering that is caused”, so do the images, the pop cultural reproductions, our ideologies around entertainment and violence erase, marginalize, or glorify particular individuals, ideas, and practices. The persevering idea of heroism as the physical strength and skill to fight battles embodied in a literal warrior’s body is representative of the limitations around our cultures idea of what heroism is. DiPaolo describes this conundrum clearly in his discussion of the depiction of President Barack Obama as a “muscle-bound warrior” in the *Barack the Barbarian* series (2009):

Americans have no tradition of respecting intelligence, or of applauding the reforming of outdated legislation, or of appreciating the moral courage and fortitude it takes to stand in opposition to corporate moguls and members of the military industrial complex. Americans, by and large, simply don’t understand that kind of heroism, so they don’t know how to identify it, how to celebrate it, or how to represent it dramatically. They do however understand sports metaphors and war metaphors, so they can grasp bravery as a man suiting up to do battle, whether in strapping on a football uniform, a battle-axe, or a rifle. (2011, 261)

It is our obsession with the “neomedieval” or “omnicompetent body complete with the paraphernalia of advanced technical weaponry” explains Braudy, as the “sole way of demonstrating heroism, for men and women alike” (2003, 114), that is demonstrative of what DiPaolo recognises as our “inability to see heroism in progressive politics, passive resistance, or the bravery it takes to assume a peaceful, multicultural attitude in an embattled, pluralistic world” (200, 261). Feminist critic Haskell similarly takes on the heroic narrative of leaving the

“ordinary life” for one of daring adventurism, physical combat, and iconic heroism as a form of cultural regression and evasion of modern responsibilities to the greater society:

The irony is that the greatest risks are not in riding the rapids or bear hunting or bullfighting, where the fight is clean and the results can be tabulated. For better or for worse, these belonged to an earlier, simpler world, and to re-enact them now in the name of virility is to seek security and peace of mind by obsolete definitions. Men have been deprived of the physical grounds for the testing of their virility and those magical mirrors women hold up to their egos. It is, still, a painful transition period. And they haven't yet adjusted to a new definition of masculinity, one that would include courage and bravery in personal relationships, endurance of a [Howard Hawks “cowboy” – style] professionalism transferred to other areas, courage to speak when one would be safer silent, to question the scruples of one's superiors (a quality that Watergate showed to be in short supply), guts, even, to admit weakness. By underrating these virtues, we fail, also, to see heroism when it appears. It is all around us, but in different guises. And so the real risks (and thus, the test of “masculinity” is the same as the test of “femininity” – it is the test of character) lie in the rising to meet other challenges, the challenge of another human being, of someone different but equal, in a love that relishes separateness, grows stronger with resistance, acknowledges its own mortality. (1973, 24-25)

Today's superheroes then, these critics argue, are truly doing us a disservice; they fail to demand new forms of heroism and to recognize them when they appear, explains DiPaolo, and more importantly they offer “no real guideposts to how to live in the real world” (2011, 262).

If, however, we recognise the “popular” as a political space wherein people are coming together as collective subjects to resist violent militarized aesthetics by questioning, dismissing, or transforming artifacts, then it becomes possible to see how artifacts that are both deliberately and meticulously aesthetically constructed to attain massive audiences are being re-politicised through satire, critique, parody, mimicry. How superhero narratives, though perhaps not completely reframing notions of heroism or providing “real guideposts” for how to live in the real world (because, let us be honest, how boring would that be?), but include snippets of everyday progressive forms of ways to live ethically and heroically through sarcasm, humour, and reflection. As this dissertation has revealed, many popular contemporary superhero characters today profoundly exemplify the complexity and difficulties of heroism in the modern

world: they are not simply “superhumans” with “superpowers” at whom we ogle their strength and battle skills, they possess a level of humanity, fallibility, empathy, generosity and perspective that enables them to recognise and represent the ambiguity in the world.

Supervillains are depicted as sympathetic villains with understandable intentions, moving us beyond simplistic representations of good and evil and suggesting we be wary of claims of right and wrong. Superheroes and supervillains shift almost seamlessly back and forth in gray worlds of ambiguity, complexity and nuance that seemingly poke fun at simplistic solutions and reveal the significance of real life dilemmas. To quote Black Widow in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016): “Do we really want to punch our way outta this?” That in spite of the possibilities to enable critical practices these films still inevitably end in a colossal and much anticipated battle suggests that much more work is required to reveal the vicious cycle of worshipping, representing, and inspiring the same old heroism.

Being curious about the almost universal enjoyment of the superhero might help us to begin to chip away at the reasons we are attracted to violence as the threshold of the political. It might also reveal opportunities, which are already being carved out, for alternative “heroic” narratives. In an interview with Chadwick Boseman, the star of *Black Panther* (2018) - the first black superhero in mainstream comics to be brought to life in a blockbuster film, and of *Marshall* (2017), a film about a young Thurgood Marshall - the first African-American Supreme Court Justice who fights racism while working as a lawyer for the NAACP – Boseman calls Marshall a “real superhero” (Interview Boseman). What if, instead of militarized battles between good versus evil the most exciting, entertaining and creative narratives in popular culture were of compassion and collaboration among difference? What if our contemporary referent of heroism was not the violent superheroes of Hollywood cinema, but rather the everyday acts of generosity,

acceptance, understanding, and selflessness? Changing our symbolic referents, argues Howard, can begin to show us that the world we live in isn't inevitable and another world is possible; that violence is avoidable and militarized responses are not inevitable. Images and narratives in popular culture rely on audience connectedness to their meanings that both reflect societal conventions providing an opportunity for self-reflexivity and critique, and more importantly, shape our attitudes and behaviours. Potential for change lies on both sides of the cinematic screen.

Popular culture is just one of the myriad ways that militarization, violence, and the paradox of insecurity is complexly embedded in our everyday lives; in demonstrating this my hope is that we may transform how the political is imagined by the discipline and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of paths towards non-violence and peace. As Walker pronounced, change seems to be upon us with a vengeance:

The incoherence of modern accounts of security is closely related to our incoherent sense of how things are probably changing. In this context, one would expect to witness a rather desperate clinging to answers, and their consequences, that have at least had the advantage of being worked out over some centuries and refined through the legitimization practices of the most powerful institutions of modern societies. One would also expect to see a certain rage against the violence perpetrated in the name of answers that carry less and less conviction and generate more and more hypocrisy. (63)

Just as some in academia have begun to recognize the paradoxes and incongruities that are entangled in the deployment of security discourses and practices, perhaps the violent implications that derive out of our clinging to the constructed myth of heroism will begin to reveal itself, in part through a reconstruction of the superhero in popular culture itself. Indeed, that superhero movies are continually being produced and consumed in record numbers is justification for why they continue to matter and exemplifies the importance of ongoing research in this area. The malleability of both militarism and superheroes means that change is possible

and necessitates diverse trans/inter-disciplinary future approaches. There is evidence of the emergence of a counterculture in both the audience who refuses to watch these films, those who watch with a critical mind, as well as embedded subversion in the creation of these films which presents the potential for multilayered readings and even critical interpretations. The discipline of IR continues to shove to the fringe studies on popular culture, however the recognition that serious aesthetic engagement enables deeper critiques of politics and alternative approaches that contend with how images, narrative, feelings, emotions, and affects contribute to understanding political practices offers an important contribution to the field: a serious and sustained unravelling of the way we do and understand politics.

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